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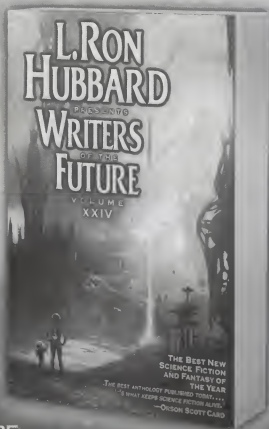
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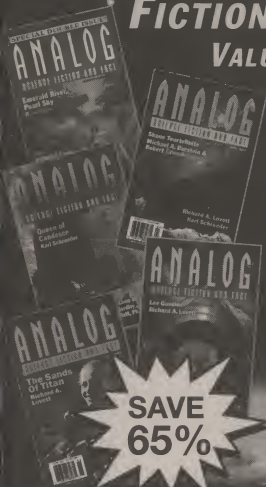
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## SCIENCE FICTION

### NOVELLAS

---

- 16 THE ERDMANN NEXUS ..... NANCY KRESS  
168 TRUTH ..... ROBERT REED

### NOVELETTES

---

- 94 DEFENDING ELYSIUM ..... BRANDON SANDERSON  
140 THE ENGLISH MUTINY ..... IAN R. MACLEOD

### SHORT STORIES

---

- 72 LISTENING FOR SUBMARINES ..... PETER HIGGINS  
86 PRAYERS FOR AN EGG ..... SARA GENGE  
125 MONEY IS NO OBJECT ..... LESLIE WHAT  
128 *DHULUMA* NO MORE ..... GORD SELLAR  
156 CAT IN THE RAIN ..... JACK SKILLINGSTEAD





**POETRY**

- 93 THE FIRST DANCERS . . . . . MICHAEL MEYERHOFER**  
**127 RETURN OF ZOMBIE TEEN ANGST . . . . . MIKE ALLEN**  
**155 GOODBYE BILLY GOAT GRUFF . . . . . JANE YOLEN**  
**167 A CRISIS OF FOREST . . . . . SANDRA LINDOW**

**DEPARTMENTS**

- 4 EDITORIAL: THE 2008  
DELL MAGAZINES AWARD . . . . . SHEILA WILLIAMS**  
**8 REFLECTIONS: BEAMING  
IT DOWN . . . . . ROBERT SILVERBERG**  
**12 ON THE NET:  
ALTERNATIVITY . . . . . JAMES PATRICK KELLY**  
**225 ON BOOKS: POST-GENRE  
SPECULATIVE FICTION . . . . . NORMAN SPINRAD**  
**238 THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR . . . ERWIN S. STRAUSS**

*Asimov's Science Fiction*, ISSN 1065-2698, Vol. 32, Nos. 10 & 11, Whole Nos. 393 & 394, October/November 2008. GST #R123293128. Published monthly except for two combined double issues in April/May and October/November by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. One year subscription \$43.90 in the United States and U.S. possessions. In all other countries \$53.90 (GST included in Canada), payable in advance in U.S. funds. Address for subscription and all other correspondence about them, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Address for all editorial matters: *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. *Asimov's Science Fiction* is the registered trademark of Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. © 2008 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. All rights reserved, printed in the U.S.A. Protection secured under the Universal and Pan American Copyright Conventions. Reproduction or use of editorial or pictorial content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All submissions must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope; the publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 40012460. POSTMASTER, send change of address to *Asimov's Science Fiction*, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. In Canada return to Quebecor St. Jean, 800 Blvd. Industriel, St. Jean, Quebec J3B 8G4.

## THE 2008 DELL MAGAZINES AWARD

After fifteen annual trips to Fort Lauderdale in conjunction with the Dell Magazines Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing (which is annually bestowed by Dell Magazines and the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts), I found myself in Orlando, Florida, on March 18—180 miles north of the world's Spring Break capital. The new location held no side trip to Disney World for me, however. I was too busy holding story consultations with our award finalists, as well as attending the conference's readings and panels.

My co-judge, Rick Wilber, and I had an unusually strong crop of stories to choose from. With so many good stories, we decided to expand our circle of semi-finalists over most other years. On Saturday night, I bestowed the award (and the check for \$500) on the winner, Stephen Leech of the University of South Florida, and handed out certificates to our finalists. Stephen, who had placed as an honorable mention in the contest in 2007, won this year's award with "Blank, White, and Blue," an extremely funny and well-researched tale that displayed a great leap forward in plotting and control. Stephen's story will appear on our website next year. In the meantime, please look for "The Uncanny Valley" by last year's winner, Natty Bokenkamp. Natty's story is up on our website now.

Seth Dickinson, a second-year student at the University of Chicago, was this year's first runner-up with his story "Hypocrite." Like

Stephen, Seth was also an honorable mention in last year's contest. In addition to his certificate, Seth will receive a two-year complementary subscription to *Asimov's*. Our second runner-up was Jeremy Figgins, a student of science fiction author John Kessel at North Carolina State University. Although Jeremy couldn't be in attendance, he received a certificate and a one-year subscription to *Asimov's* for his story, "An Acre in the Woods." Another finalist who couldn't be in attendance was our third runner-up, Rebekah White of The University of Auckland. If she had made her way from New Zealand to Florida to pick up her certificate for "Girl Wonder," Rebekah would certainly have also won the award for furthest distance traveled.

Two of this year's honorable mentions could not be on hand to receive their citations. These students were Kasey Orrell, another student from North Carolina State University and the author of "Fly True," and Sarah Miller of Bard College at Simon's Rock, who wrote "Clockwork Angels." Fortunately, we did have the delightful chance to meet Emily Tersoff of Bard College, who was the author of "Stay With Me."

Besides spending time with some of the contenders for the Dell Award, I also had a chance to hang out with a number of SF authors. In addition to visiting with regular conference-goers like James Patrick Kelly, Ted Chiang, John Kessel, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Eileen Gunn, and Brian Aldiss, I got to spend some quality time with con-

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Photo credit: Liza Groen Trombi

Left to right: Seth Dickinson, Rick Wilber, Stephen Leech,  
Sheila Williams, Emily Tersoff

ference newcomers like Judith Moffett and Robert J. Sawyer. Over drinks, Vernor Vinge and I discussed the science and music in a story by a brand-new author named Gord Sellar that Vernor had critiqued at the Clarion West Writers Workshop and that I'd scheduled for the July 2008 issue of *Asimov's*. It's new writers like Gord and Stephen and past winners of the Dell Magazines Award who will take science fiction into its unpredictable future.

We're now actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions is Friday, January 2, 2009. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned, and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is a \$10 entry fee, with up to three stories accepted for each fee paid. A special flat fee of \$25 is available for an entire classroom of writers. Instruc-

tors should send all the submissions in one or more clearly labeled envelopes with a check or money order. Checks should be made out to the Dell Magazines Award. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please do not put your name on the actual story.

Before entering the contest, contact Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. He can be reached care of:

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## BEAMING IT DOWN

The idea of beaming electricity down to Earth from satellites in space is back in the news, now that worldwide concern over global warming is bringing about some rethinking of our current ways of generating power. Power plants that burn coal, oil, or natural gas create combustion-product problems. Nuclear power plants have spooked certain segments of the population since the Three Mile Island and Chernobyl events of a generation ago, though the fact that they are actually quite safe these days and have none of the emission problems of fossil-fuel plants has begun to attract support for them even from environmentalists who long opposed them. Hydroelectric power and wind power are also carbon-free, but generating them involves building giant dams or covering great swathes of land with windmills, which engenders ecological problems of its own. The use of solar-power panels also is land-intensive, and in any case is suitable only where long hours of sunlight can be consistently counted upon. And so, since the relentless rate of growth in annual demand for electrical power is unlikely to slow down in the years ahead, the concept of shipping power down from space is getting major attention these days, nearly eighty years after it first turned up in science fiction.

One big backer this time around is the Pentagon, which issued a report in October 2007 asserting that beaming energy down from space

satellites would provide "affordable, clean, safe, reliable, sustainable, and expandable energy for mankind." Those powerful political buzzwords are to be found in a seventy-five-page study conducted for the Defense Department's National Security Space Office, which has been examining potential energy sources for worldwide U.S. military operations. The Pentagon people do note, however, that although the technology for building such space-based power plants already exists, the cost of lifting thousand of tons of apparatus for collecting and transmitting the energy into space would be formidable.

While the Defense Department ponders the budgetary aspects of such a project, the tiny Pacific nation of Palau—twenty thousand inhabitants scattered over a cluster of islands—is ready to go ahead. Palau got involved after the American entrepreneur Kevin Reed, speaking at the Fifty-Eighth International Astronautical Congress in India in September 2007, suggested that Palau's Helen Island would be a fine site for a demonstration project in which a satellite in orbit three hundred miles up would ship down microwave beams carrying one megawatt of power, enough to run a thousand homes. A 260-foot rectifying antenna, or "rectenna," would act as the receiver. Since Helen Island is uninhabited, there would be no immediate economic benefit, but the pilot rig, Reed said, would at least demonstrate the safety of

power transmissions from space.

The government of Palau quickly showed interest in the scheme, suggesting that it might well be extended to the populated islands of the archipelago. "We are keen on alternative energy," said Palau's president, Tommy Remengasau. "And if this is something that can benefit Palau, I'm sure we'd like to look at it." Reed has organized an American-Swiss-German consortium and is looking for corporate financing for the estimated eight hundred million dollar cost of the system, which he thinks can be in operation as early as 2012.

NASA has for many years been studying much more grandiose ideas for beaming power down from space. One NASA plan involves satellites in geostationary orbits, 22,300 miles up, that would be equipped with arrays of solar panels eighteen square miles in size and transmit power continuously to rectennas of similar vast area on Earth. Each of these orbiters would yield twice as much power as Hoover Dam, and, according to studies independently carried out in Japan, the beams from them would be no more dangerous than microwave ovens, though no-go zones would have to be established to keep aircraft out of their path. Another proposal—and I am indebted to SF writer Allen Steele for details of this one—is the Sun-Tower, an array of photovoltaic cells ten miles long in orbit six hundred miles high, that would collect solar energy (available twenty-four hours a day up there, remember), convert it into electricity, and send it via low-power microwave beams to rectennas on Earth. The cost of hoisting all this hardware into space and assem-

bling it there would be enormous, of course, but once the initial investment had been made, limitless supplies of carbon-free electricity would head our way.

The progenitor of the modern proposals for beaming power down from space seems to be Peter Glaser of the Arthur D. Little Corporation, who first set it forth in an article in *Science* in 1968. Gerard K. O'Neill, an advocate for the development of permanent space stations who had been working on space-colonization plans for NASA, expanded on Glaser's ideas in a 1976 book, *The High Frontier*, that led to a flood of further books and studies. Of course, power-generating stations in space began to turn up in science fiction, also. The Canadian writer Donald Kingsbury, who attended a 1977 meeting of the American Astronautical Society in San Francisco where much attention was paid to the theme of the industrialization of space, embodied the idea in a 1979 novella, "The Moon Goddess and the Son," and then a 1986 novel of the same name. In 1981, rocketry expert G. Harry Stine published under his "Lee Correy" pseudonym the novel *Space Doctor*, about the problems of constructing a power satellite in geosynchronous orbit. Allen Steele's 1989 novel *Orbital Decay* shows a gang of rough-hewn construction guys working aboard a space satellite called Olympus Station—nicknamed "Skycan"—to build a power-transmission plant. And plenty of other writers have dealt with the subject since.

But the history of the power-satellite theme in science fiction goes back much farther than that—to 1931, astonishingly, and Murray Leinster's novelette "Power Planet," which, like so many Lein-



ster stories, introduced a startling new idea to our field.

Leinster is not much spoken of in the SF world nowadays, but he was a major figure fifty years ago, commonly thought of as "the Dean of Science Fiction." He was a courtly, soft-spoken Virginian, born in 1896, whose real name was Will F. Jenkins. Though he had hoped to become a scientist, circumstances did not allow him to go beyond an eighth-grade education. Nevertheless, he pursued a lifelong interest in technology, maintaining a home laboratory from which flowed scores of patentable inventions, while at the same time carrying on a major career as a fiction writer under the "Leinster" pseudonym, with science fiction as one of his specialties. It was Murray Leinster who gave us the concept of parallel worlds in "Sidewise in Time" (1934), did one of the first generation-ship interstellar stories in that year's "Proxima Centauri," and wrote a definitive tale of the problem of communication with aliens in his classic novelette "First Contact" in 1945. His other major contributions to science fiction over the course of a fifty-year career would make a long list.

"Power Planet" appeared in the January 1931 issue of the pioneering SF magazine *Amazing Stories*. The magazine science fiction of that era was mostly pretty creaky work, but "Power Planet," despite some crude pulp touches, remains surprisingly readable today. It presents us with fiction's first power-generating space station: "The Power Planet, of course," Leinster writes, "is that vast man-made disk of metal set spinning about the sun to supply the Earth with power. Everybody learns in his grammar-school textbooks of its construction

just beyond the Moon and of its maneuvering to its preent orbit by a vast expenditure of rocket fuel. Only forty million miles from the sun's surface, its sunward side is raised nearly to red heat by the blazing radiation. And the shadow side, naturally, is down to the utter cold of space. There is a temperature drop of nearly seven hundred degrees between the two sides, and Williamson cells turn that heat-difference into electric current, with an efficiency of 99 percent. Then the big Dugald tubes—they are twenty feet long on the Power Planet—transform it into the beam which is focused always on the Earth and delivers something over a billion horsepower to the various receivers that have been erected." The space station itself is ten miles across, "and it rotates at a carefully calculated speed so that the centrifugal force at its outer edge is very nearly equal to the normal gravity of Earth. So that the nearer its center one goes, of course, the less is that force, and also the less impression of weight one has."

This is astonishing stuff for 1931. Where did Leinster/Jenkins get the idea?

The earliest known reference to an orbiting space station is in Edward Everett Hale's story "The Brick Moon" (1869), in which a satellite built of brick is launched into orbit by huge flywheels. Kurt Lasswitz' 1897 novel, *Auf Zwei Planeten (Of Two Planets)*, describes Martian space stations shaped like spoked wheels in orbit above the Earth. Neither of these says anything about power generation, of course: the first story comes from the pre-electrical age, the second from the dawning era of commercial power generation on Earth.



For the idea of a power-generating satellite we have to look to the German rocketry experimenter and space-exploration propagandist Hermann Oberth, whose 1929 book *By Rocket Into Interplanetary Space* (an expansion of his 1922 doctoral thesis, rejected by his university as "too utopian") speaks of an orbiting station 625 miles above sea level that would use immense mirrors to transmit light beams to Earth for lighting and heating large areas.

Perhaps Leinster had read something about Oberth's orbiter in Hugo Gernsback's magazine *Wonder Stories*, since Gernsback kept up with European speculative thought and frequently ran articles about it. Leinster may also have known of the work of Nikola Tesla, the brilliant Croatia-born inventor and physicist who was a fountain of dazzling and revolutionary scientific ideas but died impoverished in 1943 at the age of eighty-six. As far back as the 1890s, Tesla was trying to create a system of wireless transmission of electrical energy across great distances using a high-power ultraviolet beam. SF

writer Geoffrey Landis tells me that Hugo Gernsback was a great advocate of Tesla's work and often featured him in his magazine *Electrical Experimenter*, which Leinster/Jenkins very probably read.

Short of rummaging through dozens of fragile old magazines, I have no way of knowing whether Hugo Gernsback planted the seed that led to "Power Planet." But it is just as likely that Leinster, the inveterate gadgeteer and demonstrably ingenious author of dozens of strikingly original science fiction stories, came up with the idea of power satellites on his own. In any case, the credit for introducing the idea to science fiction, and doing it in so presciently plausible a way, must go to him.

Will such power planets be built? I think they will. Not immediately, maybe, but diminishing fossil-fuel supplies on Earth and ever-expanding electricity demand make it inevitable, perhaps not in my lifetime but quite possibly in yours, and certainly in your children's. And remember: Murray Leinster said it first. ○

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## ALTERNATIVITY

### *unhistory*

Hitler moves into the Oval Office. Napoleon redecorates Windsor Castle. The South wins the Civil War. The Spanish Armada kicks English butt. Columbus and the New World, not so much. Forget the industrial revolution and the Reformation. Imagine that the Aztecs conquer Europe and a Roman discovers America and Neanderthals are alive and well in Wisconsin. And on and on and on. The past has long been our genre's other playground because we are inextricably drawn to the provocative ideas of alternate history.

But what kind of writing is this anyway? The invaluable **Alternate History Wiki** <[wiki.alternatehistory.com](http://wiki.alternatehistory.com)> defines it thus: "... alternate history generally exists as works of fiction, either in narrative (story) format or in the form of an essay or other non-narrative work, which have been created at least in part to showcase an imagined world where a change at some point in history led to events that could have happened, but did not happen in the actual past." But is alternate history—or as historians sometimes call it, "counterfactual history"—SF or fantasy? It feels like science fiction, since it embraces SF's extrapolative imperative: *what if?* And for the most part it accepts SF's prime directive: *obey the laws of nature.*

For the sake of clarity, I make a distinction between alternate history and parallel worlds. A parallel world is one that is like ours in some ways and may well connect to our world, but in which the laws of nature are different. In many parallel worlds, magic works and fairies lurk. Think **Oz** <[halcyon.com/piglet/books1.htm](http://halcyon.com/piglet/books1.htm)>, for example. Or perhaps the physics are different, as in the immortal Isaac Asimov's **The Gods Themselves** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Gods\\_Themselves](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gods_Themselves)>.

But, of course, alternate history is a mirror image of SF, in that it takes place not in the future but in the past. If we accept some simplistic but useful definitions of SF and fantasy—i.e., science fiction is the literature of the mind-boggling things that could happen and fantasy is the literature of marvelous things that can't—then it would seem that alternate history is fantasy.

### *the quantum joke*

Okay, stop me if you've heard **this one** <[www.phobe.com/s\\_cat/s\\_cat.html](http://www.phobe.com/s_cat/s_cat.html)>: A cat walks into a box with a Geiger counter, a radioactive atom, and a flask of poison. A guy named Schrödinger shuts the box and waits an hour. As it turns out, there is an excellent chance

that the atom will decay in that time. If it does, the Geiger counter is rigged to break the flask and kill the cat. At the end of the hour, according to a hilarious law of quantum kinematics called superposition, the atom must exist in all its possible states. This means that it has both decayed and not decayed. Which means that the cat is both alive and dead.

By the way, Einstein liked to tell a similar quantum joke, only instead of killing a cat, his involved an exploding keg of gunpowder.

In any event, this joke has two punch lines.

The way **Neils Bohr** <[nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/physics/laureates/1922/bohr-bio.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1922/bohr-bio.html)> tells it, when Schrödinger opens the box, he sees whether the cat is dead or alive, which means that he has also observed whether the atom has decayed or not. At the moment of observation the cat/atom system stops being in the superposition state and its wave function collapses into either a decayed or an undecayed state, dead kitty or live kitty. But wait, you may say, isn't Schrödinger part of the system? If a tree falls in the forest and Schrödinger isn't there to hear it, does it make a noise? At this point, you should either begin work on your Ph.D. in physics or take two aspirin and go to bed.

But in 1954, a PhD candidate in physics named **Hugh Everett** <[space.mit.edu/home/tegmark/Everett](http://space.mit.edu/home/tegmark/Everett)> came up with another punch line. In his version, there is nothing special about Schrödinger's observation because the cat *is* both dead and alive, but in two separate worlds. At the moment Schrödinger opens the box, the world splits into two parallel worlds that are deco-

herent from one another. No communication between them is possible. This **Many Worlds Interpretation (MWI)** <[anthropic-principle.com/preprints/manyworlds.html](http://anthropic-principle.com/preprints/manyworlds.html)> of quantum mechanics replaces the awkwardness of having observers create reality with the bizarre and continuous propagation of alternate worlds. Think of it: a gajillion Jim Kellys typing a gajillion columns in a gajillion *Asimov's*. And there are quite a few of you as well, dear reader. But although there are many, many of us, there is only one "I" and just one "you." Those other Jim Kellys have different bios, some radically different. But "I," the Jim of our world, have but one biography.

If the Many Worlds Interpretation is right.

And how likely is that? In 1995, American researcher David Raub took a poll of 72 leading physicists and reported that 58 percent agreed with the statement "Yes, I think MWI is true," 18 percent said "No, I don't accept MWI," 13 percent equivocated "Maybe it's true but I'm not yet convinced," and 11 percent had no opinion. Among those in the majority were **Stephen Hawking** <[hawking.org.uk](http://hawking.org.uk)>, **Murray Gell-Mann** <[nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/physics/laureates/1969/gell-mann-bio.html](http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/physics/laureates/1969/gell-mann-bio.html)> and **Richard Feynman** <[feynman.com](http://feynman.com)>. On the other hand, **Roger Penrose** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger\\_Penrose](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Penrose)> does not accept MWI. Of course, science has often as not refuted majority opinion and in the wacky precincts of quantum theory, reality is regularly reduced to a probability. But if these distinguished scientists hold to at least some flavor of MWI, then maybe it's time to regard alternate history as closer to SF than fantasy.

clickage

The Alternate History Wiki is brought to you by the good folks at **AlternateHistory.com** <*AlternateHistory.com*>, the largest gathering of fans of AH on the internet. This busy site has over 4000 registered members and is home to three quarters of a million posts. The discussions are erudite and far-ranging; however, they focus on history itself and not the literary incarnation of alternate history.

For that try **Uchronia, the Alternate History List** <*uchronia.net*>. This is a must click site for AH buffs, coordinated by Robert Schmunk. It is the most comprehensive list of published alternate history books and stories you'll find anywhere, sorted alphabetically by author. Each of the works in the list is given a summary, date of divergence from history as well as a publication and awards history. For many of the works listed there is also a *what if* entry: what if Al Smith beat Herbert Hoover in the election of 1928, what if Leonardo Da Vinci developed his flying machine with the help of Niccolo Machiavelli, what if the dinosaurs hadn't died off. Like *AlternateHistory.com*, this is a treasure trove of ideas for the aspiring writer of AH.

Ever since 1996, the very best AH has been recognized by the **Sidewise Awards** <*uchronia.net/sidewise*>. These juried awards are given in two categories, short and long form. In addition, the jury from time to time gives a Special Achievement Award. You should not be surprised to find that many stories from this very publication have either been finalists for the Sidewise or have won the award.

The front page of **Othertime-**

**lines.com** <*othertimelines.com*> offers this greeting: "Welcome to This Day in Alternate History." When it was active, this site allowed you to propose a divergence from history and then to explore the ramifications of that change through time. Other people could help you explore your timeline as well. Alas, the site does not seem to have been updated recently, but there are many timelines still in place. Checking the events that occurred on my birthday, for example, I find nine different timelines mentioned. Here are some of the things that happened on that happy (for me!) day: in 324 Licinus defeated Constantine, becoming sole ruler of the Roman Empire. In 1589, British troops invaded Spain, which never recovered from the defeat of its Armada. In 1980, the hostages were rescued in Iran and the Ayatollah Khomeini's power began to fade.

An online AH 'zine that is still going strong is **Changing The Times** <*changingthetimes.net*>. Updated monthly, the content on this lively site comes from a number of regular contributors. You must join in order to post, but anyone can read. Members agree to post regularly. While the quality of the prose varies considerably, the quality of thought is uniformly high.

One of the most amusing AH sites I found is actually an extended post on the excellent **No Fear of the Future** <*nofearofthefuture.blogspot.com*> blog. It is **An Alternate History of Chinese Science Fiction** <*nofearofthefuture.blogspot.com/2007/05/alternate-history-of-chinese-science.html*>, which is part jape and part literary criticism. Writing as Wang An Nuan, one **Jess Nevins** <*geocities.com/ratmmjess*> lists the most influential SF books

of the last hundred years, from 4600 to 4700. (For those of you who are wondering, this is the year 4705 in the Chinese calendar.) He reviews such classics as Bai Ai Tan's *A Princess of Mars* (4609) "No one will ever call Bai Ai Tan a great writer, and parts of *A Princess of Mars* have aged badly . . . but *A Princess of Mars* and the other Barsoom stories still carry a certain pulp charge." Of Bei Ao Lan's *The Stars My Destination* (4653), he writes "All Bei and *Stars* did was capture the mood of SF fans impatient to reach the stars before the Americans." He restates the obvious in his discussion of Kong Wang Lian's *Neuromancer* (4681). "Kong didn't create cyberpunk, or even coin the word, but Kong's enormous success, far more than Xu Bin Rong's, spawned a decade of imitators." The cover art accompanying the reviews is priceless. Give this essay a click for insight mixed with chuckles.

exit

Like so many of you, I love AH. Some of my dozens of fans (hi, Mom!) may be wondering why I haven't dipped into this vibrant genre. I have, but you've never heard about it. You see, I have a parallel career up here in chilly New Hampshire as a playwright, and, in 2005, my full-length play *The Duel* had its world premiere with nine performances in Portsmouth and two in Manchester. Here's my *what if*: Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton fight their famous duel, but they both miss. *Result*: the Civil War breaks out fifty years early, except the North secedes from the South. Okay, you're dubious. Google the **Hartford Convention** <[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hartford\\_Convention](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hartford_Convention)> and think about it.

You see, I enjoy the game as much as the next guy. O

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# THE ERDMANN NEXUS

Nancy Kress

With stories already published in over a dozen languages, Nancy Kress continues to go global this year as the new columnist for the Chinese *Science Fiction World* magazine. In addition, this winter she will spend a semester in Saxony as a guest lecturer for the University of Leipzig. Despite all the extra work, Nancy still has three new books coming out in the remaining months of 2008. One novel, *Steal Across the Sky* (Tor, December 2008), should be of interest to readers of "The Erdmann Nexus," since it takes a deeper look into the unknown regions of the human psyche that are explored here as well. *Asimov's* would also like to congratulate the author for winning the 2007 Nebula for her novella "Fountain of Age" (July 2007).

*"Errors, like straws, upon the surface flow,  
He who would reach for pearls must dive below."*

—John Dryden

**T**he ship, which would have looked nothing like a ship to Henry Erdmann, moved between the stars, traveling in an orderly pattern of occurrences in the vacuum flux. Over several cubic light-years of space, subatomic particles appeared, existed, and winked out of existence in nanoseconds. Flop transitions tore space and then reconfigured it as the ship moved on. Henry, had he somehow been nearby in the cold of deep space, would have died from the complicated, regular, intense bursts of radiation long before he could have had time to appreciate their shimmering beauty.

*All at once the ship stopped moving.*

*The radiation bursts increased, grew even more complex. Then the ship abruptly changed direction. It accelerated, altering both space and time as it sped on, healing the alterations in its wake. Urgency shot through it.*

*Something, far away, was struggling to be born.*

## ONE

**H**enry Erdmann stood in front of the mirror in his tiny bedroom, trying to knot his tie with one hand. The other hand gripped his walker. It was an unsteady business, and the tie ended up crooked. He yanked it out and began again. Carrie would be here soon.

He always wore a tie to the college. Let the students—and graduate students, at that!—come to class in ripped jeans and obscene T-shirts and hair tangled as if colonized by rats. Even the girls. Students were students, and Henry didn't consider their sloppiness disrespectful, the way so many did at St. Sebastian's. Sometimes he was even amused by it, in a sad sort of way. Didn't these intelligent, sometimes driven, would-be physicists know how ephemeral their beauty was? Why did they go to such lengths to look unappealing, when soon enough that would be their only choice?

This time he got the tie knotted. Not perfectly—a difficult operation, one-handed—but close enough for government work. He smiled. When he and his colleagues had been doing government work, only perfection was good enough. Atomic bombs were like that. Henry could still hear Oppie's voice saying the plans for Ivy Mike were "technically sweet." Of course, that was before all the—

A knock on the door and Carrie's fresh young voice. "Dr. Erdmann? Are you ready?"

She always called him by his title, always treated him with respect. Not like some of the nurses and assistants. "How are we today, Hank?" that overweight blonde asked yesterday. When he answered stiffly, "I don't know about you, madame, but I'm fine, thank you," she'd only laughed. *Old people are so formal—it's so cute!* Henry could just hear her saying it to one of her horrible colleagues. He had never been "Hank" in his entire life.

"Coming, Carrie." He put both hands on the walker and inched forward—clunk, clunk, clunk—the walker sounding loud even on the carpeted floor. His class's corrected problem sets lay on the table by the door. He'd given them some really hard problems this week, and only Haldane had succeeded in solving all of them. Haldane had promise. An inventive mind, yet rigorous, too. They could have used him in '52 on Project Ivy, developing the Teller-Ulam staged fusion H-bomb.

Halfway across the living room of his tiny apartment in the Assisted Living Facility, something happened in Henry's mind.

He stopped, astonished. It had felt like a tentative *touch*, a ghostly finger inside his brain. Astonishment was immediately replaced by fear. Was he having a stroke? At ninety, anything was possible. But he felt fine, better in fact than for several days. Not a stroke. So what—

"Dr. Erdmann?"



"I'm here." He clunked to the door and opened it. Carrie wore a cherry red sweater, a fallen orange leaf caught on her hat, and sunglasses. Such a pretty girl, all bronze hair and bright skin and vibrant color. Outside it was drizzling. Henry reached out and gently removed the sunglasses. Carrie's left eye was swollen and discolored, the iris and pupil invisible under the outraged flesh.

"The bastard," Henry said.

That was Henry and Carrie going down the hall toward the elevator, thought Evelyn Krenchnoted. She waved from her armchair, her door wide open as always, but they were talking and didn't notice. She strained to hear, but just then another plane went overhead from the airport. Those pesky flight paths were too near St. Sebastian's! On the other hand, if they weren't, Evelyn couldn't afford to live here. Always look on the bright side!

Since this was Tuesday afternoon, Carrie and Henry were undoubtedly going to the college. So wonderful the way Henry kept busy—you'd never guess his real age, that was for sure. He even had all his hair! Although that jacket was too light for September, and not waterproof. Henry might catch cold. She would speak to Carrie about it. And why was Carrie wearing sunglasses when it was raining?

But if Evelyn didn't start her phone calls, she would be late! People were depending on her! She keyed in the first number, listened to it ring one floor below. "Bob? It's Evelyn. Now, dear, tell me—how's your blood pressure today?"

"Fine," Bob Donovan said.

"Are you sure? You sound a bit grumpy, dear."

"I'm fine, Evelyn. I'm just busy."

"Oh, that's good! With what?"

"Just busy."

"Always good to keep busy! Are you coming to Current Affairs tonight?"

"Dunno."

"You should. You really should. Intellectual stimulation is so important for people our age!"

"Gotta go," Bob grunted.

"Certainly, but first, how did your granddaughter do with—"

He'd hung up. Really, very grumpy. Maybe he was having problems with irregularity. Evelyn would recommend a high colonic.

Her next call was more responsive. Gina Martinelli was, as always, thrilled with Evelyn's attention. She informed Gina minutely about the state of her arthritis, her gout, her diabetes, her son's weight problem, her other son's wife's step-daughter's miscarriage, all interspersed with quotations from the Bible ("Take a little wine for thy stomach"—First Timothy.) She answered all Evelyn's questions and wrote down all her recommendations and—

"Evelyn?" Gina said. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, I—" Evelyn fell silent, an occurrence so shocking that Gina gasped, "Hit your panic button!"

"No, no, I'm fine, I . . . I just remembered something for a moment."



"Remembered something? What?"

But Evelyn didn't know. It hadn't been a memory, exactly, it had been a . . . what? A feeling, a vague but somehow strong sensation of . . . something.

"Evelyn?"

"I'm here!"

"The Lord decides when to call us home, and I guess it's not your time yet. Did you hear about Anna Chernov? That famous ballet dancer on Four? She fell last night and broke her leg and they had to move her to the Infirmary."

"No!"

"Yes, poor thing. They say it's only temporary, until they get her stabilized, but you know what that means."

She did. They all did. First the Infirmary, then up to Seven, where you didn't even have your own little apartment any more, and eventually to Nursing on Eight and Nine. Better to go quick and clean, like Jed Fuller last month. But Evelyn wasn't going to let herself think like that! A positive attitude was so important!

Gina said, "Anna is doing pretty well, I hear. The Lord never sends more than a person can bear."

Evelyn wasn't so sure about that, but it never paid to argue with Gina, who was convinced that she had God on redial. Evelyn said, "I'll visit her before the Stitch 'n Bitch meeting. I'm sure she'll want company. Poor girl—you know, those dancers, they just abuse their health for years and years, so what can you expect?"

"I know!" Gina said, not without satisfaction. "They pay a terrible price for beauty. It's a little vain, actually."

"Did you hear about that necklace she has in the St. Sebastian's safe?"

"No! What necklace?"

"A fabulous one! Doris Dziwalski told me. It was given to Anna by some famous Russian dancer who was given it by the czar!"

"What czar?"

"The czar! You know, of Russia. Doris said it's worth a fortune and that's why it's in the safe. Anna never wears it."

"Vanity," Gina said. "She probably doesn't like the way it looks now against her wrinkly neck."

"Doris said Anna's depressed."

"No, it's vanity. 'Lo, I looked and saw that all was—'"

"I'll recommend acupuncture to her," Evelyn interrupted. "Acupuncture is good for depression." But first she'd call Erin, to tell her the news.

Erin Bass let the phone ring. It was probably that tiresome bore Evelyn Krenchnoted, eager to check on Erin's blood pressure or her cholesterol or her Islets of Langerhans. Oh, Erin should answer the phone, there was no harm in the woman, Erin should be more charitable. But why? Why should one have to be more charitable just because one was old?

She let the phone ring and returned to her book, Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. Greene's world-weary despair was a silly affectation but he was a wonderful writer, and too much underrated nowadays.

*The liner came in on a Saturday evening: from the bedroom window they could see its long grey form steal past the boom, beyond the—*

Something was happening.

*—steal past the boom, beyond the—*

Erin was no longer in St. Sebastian's, she was nowhere, she was lifted away from everything, she was beyond the—

Then it was over and she sat again in her tiny apartment, the book sliding unheeded off her lap.

Anna Chernov was dancing. She and Paul stood with two other couples on the stage, under the bright lights. Balanchine himself stood in the second wing, and even though Anna knew he was there to wait for Suzanne's solo, his presence inspired her. The music began. *Promenade en couronne, attitude, arabesque effacé* and into the lift, Paul's arms raising her. She was lifted out of herself and then she was soaring above the stage, over the heads of the corps de ballet, above Suzanne Farrell herself, soaring through the roof of the New York State Theater and into the night sky, spreading her arms in a *porte de bras* wide enough to take in the glittering night sky, soaring in the most perfect *jeté* in the universe, until . . .

"She's smiling," Bob Donovan said, before he knew he was going to speak at all. He looked down at the sleeping Anna, so beautiful she didn't even look real, except for the leg in its big ugly cast. In one hand, feeling like a fool but what the fuck, he held three yellow roses.

"The painkillers do that sometimes," the Infirmary nurse said. "I'm afraid you can't stay, Mr. Donovan."

Bob scowled at her. But it wasn't like he meant it or anything. This nurse wasn't so bad. Not like some. Maybe because she wasn't any spring chicken herself. *A few more years, sister, and you'll be here right with us.*

"Give her these, okay?" He thrust the roses at the nurse.

"I will, yes," she said, and he walked out of the medicine-smelling Infirmary—he hated that smell—back to the elevator. Christ, what a sorry old fart he was. Anna Chernov, that nosy old broad Evelyn Krenchnoted once told him, used to dance at some famous place in New York, Abraham Center or something. Anna had been famous. But Evelyn could be wrong, and anyway it didn't matter. From the first moment Bob Donovan laid eyes on Anna Chernov, he'd wanted to give her things. Flowers. Jewelry. Anything she wanted. Anything he had. And how stupid and fucked-up was that, at his age? Give me a break!

He took the elevator to the first floor, stalked savagely through the lobby, and went out the side door to the "remembrance garden." Stupid name, New Age-y stupid. He wanted to kick something, wanted to bellow for—

Energy punched through him, from the base of his spine up his back and into his brain, mild but definite, like a shock from a busted toaster or something. Then it was gone.

What the fuck was *that*? Was he okay? If he fell, like Anna—

He was okay. He didn't have Anna's thin delicate bones. Whatever it was, was gone now. Just one of those things.

\* \* \*

On a Nursing floor of St. Sebastian's, a woman with just a few days to live muttered in her long, last half-sleep. An IV dripped morphine into her arm, easing the passage. No one listened to the mutterings; it had been years since they'd made sense. For a moment she stopped and her eyes, again bright in the ravaged face that had once been so lovely, grew wide. But for only a moment. Her eyes closed and the mindless muttering resumed.

In Tijuana, a vigorous old man sitting behind his son's market stall, where he sold cheap serapes to jabbering *turistas*, suddenly lifted his face to the sun. His mouth, which still had all its white flashing teeth, made a big O.

In Bombay, a widow dressed in white looked out her window at the teeming streets, her face gone blank as her sari.

In Chengdu, a monk sitting on his cushion on the polished floor of the meditation room in the ancient Wenshu Monastery, shattered the holy silence with a shocking, startled laugh.

## TWO

Carrie Vesey sat in the back of Dr. Erdmann's classroom and thought about murder.

Not that she would ever do it, of course. Murder was wrong. Taking a life filled her with horror that was only—

*Ground-up castor beans were a deadly poison.*

—made worse by her daily witnessing of old people's aching desire to hold onto life. Also, she—

*Her step-brother had once shown her how to disable the brakes on a car.*

—knew she wasn't the kind of person who solved problems that boldly. And anyway her—

*The battered-woman defense almost always earned acquittal from juries.*

—lawyer said that a paper trail of restraining orders and ER documentation was by far the best way to—

*If a man was passed out from a dozen beers, he'd never feel a bullet from his own service revolver.*

—put Jim behind bars legally. That, the lawyer said, "would solve the problem"—as if a black eye and a broken arm and constant threats that left her scared even when Jim wasn't in the same city were all just a theoretical "problem," like the ones Dr. Erdmann gave his physics students.

He sat on top of a desk in the front of the room, talking about something called the "Bose-Einstein condensate." Carrie had no idea what that was, and she didn't care. She just liked being here, sitting unheeded in the back of the room. The physics students, nine boys and two girls, were none of them interested in her presence, her black eye, or her beauty. When Dr. Erdmann was around, he commanded all their geeky attention,

and that was indescribably restful. Carrie tried—unsuccessfully, she knew—to hide her beauty. Her looks had brought her nothing but trouble: Gary, Eric, Jim. So now she wore baggy sweats and no make-up, and crammed her twenty-four-carat-gold hair under a shapeless hat. Maybe if she was as smart as these students she would have learned to pick a different kind of man, but she wasn't, and she hadn't, and Dr. Erdmann's classroom was a place she felt safe. Safer, even, than St. Sebastian's, which was where Jim had blackened her eye.

He'd slipped in through the loading dock, she guessed, and caught her alone in the linens supply closet. He was gone after one punch, and when she called her exasperated lawyer and he found out she had no witnesses and St. Sebastian's had "security," he'd said there was nothing he could do. It would be her word against Jim's. She had to be able to *prove* that the restraining order had been violated.

Dr. Erdmann was talking about "proof," too: some sort of mathematical proof. Carrie had been good at math, in high school. Only Dr. Erdmann had said once that what she'd done in high school wasn't "mathematics," only "arithmetic." "Why didn't you go to college, Carrie?" he'd asked.

"No money," she said in a tone that meant: Please don't ask anything else. She just hadn't felt up to explaining about Daddy and the alcoholism and the debts and her abusive step-brothers, and Dr. Erdmann hadn't asked. He was sensitive that way.

Looking at his tall, stooped figure sitting on the desk, his walker close to hand, Carrie sometimes let herself dream that Dr. Erdmann—Henry—was fifty years younger. Forty to her twenty-eight—that would work. She'd Googled a picture of him at that age, when he'd been working at someplace called the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory. He'd been handsome, dark-haired, smiling into the camera next to his wife, Ida. She hadn't been as pretty as Carrie, but she'd gone to college, so even if Carrie had been born back then, she wouldn't have had a chance with him. Story of her life.

"—have any questions?" Dr. Erdmann finished.

The students did—they always did—clamoring to be heard, not raising their hands, interrupting each other. But when Dr. Erdmann spoke, immediately they all shut up. Someone leapt up to write equations on the board. Dr. Erdmann slowly turned his frail body to look at them. The discussion went on a long time, almost as long as the class. Carrie fell asleep.

When she woke, it was to Dr. Erdmann, leaning on his walker, gently jiggling her shoulder. "Carrie?"

"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry!"

"Don't be. We bored you to death, poor child."

"No! I loved it!"

He raised his eyebrows and she felt shamed. He thought she was telling a polite lie, and he had very little tolerance for lies. But the truth is, she always loved being here.

Outside, it was full dark. The autumn rain had stopped and the unseen ground had that mysterious, fertile smell of wet leaves. Carrie helped Dr. Erdmann into her battered Toyota and slid behind the wheel. As they started back toward St. Sebastian's, she could tell that he was exhausted.

Those students asked too much of him! It was enough that he taught one advanced class a week, sharing all that physics, without them also demanding he—

"Dr. Erdmann?"

For a long terrible moment she thought he was dead. His head lolled against the seat but he wasn't asleep. His open eyes rolled back into his head. Carrie jerked the wheel to the right and slammed the Toyota alongside the curb. He was still breathing.

"Dr. Erdmann? *Henry*?"

Nothing. Carrie dove into her purse, fumbling for her cell phone. Then it occurred to her that his panic button would be faster. She tore open the buttons on his jacket; he wasn't wearing the button. She scrambled again for the purse, starting to sob.

"Carrie?"

He was sitting up now, a shadowy figure. She hit the overhead light. His face, a fissured landscape, looked dazed and pale. His pupils were huge.

"What happened? Tell me." She tried to keep her voice even, to observe everything, because it was important to be able to make as full a report as possible to Dr. Jamison. But her hand clutched at his sleeve.

He covered her fingers with his. His voice sounded dazed. "I . . . don't know. I was . . . somewhere else?"

"A stroke?" That was what they were all afraid of. Not death, but to be incapacitated, reduced to partiality. And for Dr. Erdmann, with his fine mind . . .

"No." He sounded definite. "Something else. I don't know. Did you call 911 yet?"

The cell phone lay inert in her hand. "No, not yet, there wasn't time for—"

"Then don't. Take me home."

"All right, but you're going to see the doctor as soon as we get there." She was pleased, despite everything, with her firm tone.

"It's seven-thirty. They'll all have gone home."

But they hadn't. As soon as Carrie and Dr. Erdmann walked into the lobby, she saw a man in a white coat standing by the elevators. "Wait!" she called, loud enough that several people turned to look, evening visitors and ambulatories and a nurse Carrie didn't know. She didn't know the doctor, either, but she rushed over to him, leaving Dr. Erdmann leaning on his walker by the main entrance.

"Are you a doctor? I'm Carrie Vesey and I was bringing Dr. Erdmann—a patient, Henry Erdmann, not a medical doctor—home when he had some kind of attack, he seems all right now but someone needs to look at him, he says—"

"I'm not an M.D.," the man said, and Carrie looked at him in dismay. "I'm a neurological researcher."

She rallied. "Well, you're the best we're going to get at this hour so please look at him!" She was amazed at her own audacity.

"All right." He followed her to Dr. Erdmann, who scowled because, Carrie knew, he hated this sort of fuss. The non-M.D. seemed to pick up on that right away. He said pleasantly, "Dr. Erdmann? I'm Jake DiBella. Will

you come this way, sir?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned and led the way down a side corridor. Carrie and Dr. Erdmann followed, everybody's walk normal, but still people watched. *Move along, nothing to see here . . . why were they still staring? Why were people such ghouls?*

But they weren't, really. That was just her own fear talking.

*You trust too much, Carrie*, Dr. Erdmann had said just last week.

In a small room on the second floor, he sat heavily on one of the three metal folding chairs. The room held the chairs, a gray filing cabinet, an ugly metal desk, and nothing else. Carrie, a natural nester, pursed her lips, and this Dr. DiBella caught that, too.

"I've only been here a few days," he said apologetically. "Haven't had time yet to properly move in. Dr. Erdmann, can you tell me what happened?"

"Nothing." He wore his lofty look. "I just fell asleep for a moment and Carrie became alarmed. Really, there's no need for this fuss."

"You fell asleep?"

"Yes."

"All right. Has that happened before?"

Did Dr. Erdmann hesitate, ever so briefly? "Yes, occasionally. I *am* ninety, doctor."

DiBella nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned to Carrie. "And what happened to you? Did it occur at the same time that Dr. Erdmann fell asleep?"

Her eye. That's why people had stared in the lobby. In her concern for Dr. Erdmann, she'd forgotten about her black eye, but now it immediately began to throb again. Carrie felt herself go scarlet.

Dr. Erdmann answered. "No, it didn't happen at the same time. There was no car accident, if that's what you're implying. Carrie's eye is unrelated."

"I fell," Carrie said, knew that no one believed her, and lifted her chin.

"Okay," DiBella said amiably. "But as long as you're here, Dr. Erdmann, I'd like to enlist your help. Yours, and as many other volunteers as I can enlist at St. Sebastian's. I'm here on a Gates Foundation grant in conjunction with Johns Hopkins, to map shifts in brain electrochemistry during cerebral arousal. I'm asking volunteers to donate a few hours of their time to undergo completely painless brain scans while they look at various pictures and videos. Your participation will be an aid to science."

Carrie saw that Dr. Erdmann was going to refuse, despite the magic word "science," but then he hesitated. "What kind of brain scans?"

"Asher-Peyton and functional MRI."

"All right. I'll participate."

Carrie blinked. That didn't sound like Dr. Erdmann, who considered physics and astronomy the only "true" sciences and the rest merely poor step-children. But this Dr. DiBella wasn't about to let his research subject get away. He said quickly, "Excellent! Tomorrow morning at eleven, Lab 6B, at the hospital. Ms. Vesey, can you bring him over? Are you a relative?"

"No, I'm an aide here. Call me Carrie. I can bring him." Wednesday wasn't one of her usual days for Dr. Erdmann, but she'd get Marie to swap schedules.

"Wonderful. Please call me Jake." He smiled at her, and something turned over in Carrie's chest. It wasn't just that he was so handsome,



with his black hair and gray eyes and nice shoulders, but also that he had masculine confidence and an easy way with him and no ring on his left hand . . . *idiot*. There was no particular warmth in his smile; it was completely professional. Was she always going to assess every man she met as a possible boyfriend? Was she really that needy?

Yes. But this one wasn't interested. And anyway, he was an educated scientist and she worked a minimum-wage job. She *was* an idiot.

She got Dr. Erdmann up to his apartment and said goodnight. He seemed distant, preoccupied. Going down in the elevator, a mood of desolation came over her. What she really wanted was to stay and watch Henry Erdmann's TV, sleep on his sofa, wake up to fix his coffee and have someone to talk to while she did it. Not go back to her shabby apartment, bolted securely against Jim but never secure enough that she felt really safe. She'd rather stay here, in a home for failing old people, and how perverted and sad was that?

And what *had* happened to Dr. Erdmann on the way home from the college?

### THREE

**T**wice now. Henry lay awake, wondering what the hell was going on in his brain. He was accustomed to relying on that organ. His knees had succumbed to arthritis, his hearing aid required constant adjustment, and his prostate housed a slow-growing cancer that, the doctor said, wouldn't kill him until long after something else did—the medical profession's idea of cheerful news. But his brain remained clear, and using it well had always been his greatest pleasure. Greater even than sex, greater than food, greater than marriage to Ida, much as he had loved her.

God, the things that age let you admit.

Which were the best years? No question there: Los Alamos, working on Operation Ivy with Ulam and Teller and Carson Mark and the rest. The excitement and frustration and awe of developing the "Sausage," the first test of staged radiation implosion. The day it was detonated at Eniwetok. Henry, a junior member of the team, hadn't of course been present at the atoll, but he'd waited breathlessly for the results from Bogon. He'd cheered when Teller, picking up the shock waves on a seismometer in California, had sent his three-word telegram to Los Alamos: "It's a boy." Harry Truman himself had requested that bomb—"to see to it that our country is able to defend itself against any possible aggressor"—and Henry was proud of his work on it.

Shock waves. Yes, *that* was what today's two incidents had felt like: shock waves to the brain. A small wave in his apartment, a larger one in Carrie's car. But from what? It could only be some failure of his nervous system, the thing he dreaded most of all, far more than he dreaded death. Granted, teaching physics to graduate students was a long way from Los Alamos or Livermore, and most of the students were dolts—although not Haldane—but Henry enjoyed it. Teaching, plus reading the journals and

following the on-line listserves, were his connection with physics. If some neurological "shock wave" disturbed his brain . . .

It was a long time before he could sleep.

"Oh my Lord, dear, what happened to *your eye*?"

Evelyn Krenchnoted sat with her friend Gina Somebody in the tiny waiting room outside Dr. O'Kane's office. Henry scowled at her. Just like Evelyn to blurt out like that, embarrassing poor Carrie. The Krenchnoted woman was the most tactless busybody Henry had ever met, and he'd known a lot of physicists, a group not noted for tact. But at least the physicists hadn't been busybodies.

"I'm fine," Carrie said, trying to smile. "I walked into a door."

"Oh, dear, how did that happen? You should tell the doctor. I'm sure he could make a few minutes to see you, even though he must be running behind, I didn't actually have an appointment today but he said he'd squeeze me in because something strange happened yesterday that I want to ask him about, but the time he gave me was supposed to start five minutes ago and you must be scheduled after that, he saw Gina already but she—"

Henry sat down and stopped listening. Evelyn's noise, however, went on and on, a grating whine like a dentist drill. He imagined her on Eniwetok, rising into the air on a mushroom cloud, still talking. It was a relief when the doctor's door opened and a woman came out, holding a book.

Henry had seen her before, although he didn't know her name. Unlike most of the old bats at St. Sebastian's, she was worth looking at. Not with Carrie's radiant youthful beauty, of course; this woman must be in her seventies, at least. But she stood straight and graceful; her white hair fell in simple waves to her shoulders; her cheekbones and blue eyes were still good. However, Henry didn't care for the way she was dressed. It reminded him of all those stupid childish protestors outside Los Alamos in the fifties and sixties. The woman wore a white T-shirt, a long cotton peasant skirt, a necklace of beads and shells, and several elaborate rings.

"Erin!" Evelyn cried. "How was your appointment? Everything okay?"

"Fine. Just a check-up." Erin smiled vaguely and moved away. Henry strained to see the cover of her book: *Tao Te Ching*. Disappointment lanced through him. One of *those*.

"But you weren't scheduled for a check-up, no more than I was. So what happened that —" Erin walked quickly away, her smile fixed. Evelyn said indignantly, "Well, I call that just plain rude! Did you see that, Gina? You try to be friendly to some people and they just—"

"Mrs. Krenchnoted?" the nurse said, sticking her head out the office door. "The doctor will see you now."

Evelyn lumbered up and through the door, still talking. In the blessed silence that followed, Henry said to Carrie, "How do you suppose Mr. Krenchnoted stood it?"

Carrie giggled and waved her hand toward the Krenchnoted's friend, Gina. But Gina was asleep in her chair, which at least explained how *she* stood it.

Carrie said, "I'm glad you have this appointment today, Dr. Erdmann. You *will* tell him about what happened in the car yesterday, won't you?"



"Yes."

"You promise?"

"Yes." Why were all women, even mild little Carrie, so insistent on regular doctor visits? Yes, doctors were useful for providing pills to keep the machine going, but Henry's view was that you only needed to see a physician if something felt wrong. In fact, he'd forgotten about this regularly scheduled check-up until this morning, when Carrie called to say how convenient it was that his appointment here was just an hour before the one with Dr. DiBella at the hospital lab. Ordinarily Henry would have refused to go at all, except that he did intend to ask Dr. Jamison about the incident in the car.

Also, it was possible that fool Evelyn Krenchnoted was actually right about something for once. "Carrie, maybe you *should* ask the doctor to look at that eye."

"No. I'm fine."

"Has Jim called or come around again since—"

"No."

Clearly she didn't want to talk about it. Embarrassment, most likely. Henry could respect her reticence. Silently he organized his questions for Jamison.

But after Henry had gone into the office, leaving Carrie in the waiting room, and after he'd endured the tediums of the nurse's measuring his blood pressure, of peeing into a cup, of putting on a ridiculous paper gown, it wasn't Jamison who entered the room but a brusque, impossibly young boy in a white lab coat and officious manner.

"I'm Dr. Felton, Henry. How are we today?" He studied Henry's chart, not looking at him.

Henry gritted his teeth. "You would know better than I, I imagine."

"Feeling a bit cranky? Are your bowels moving all right?"

"My bowels are fine. They thank you for your concern."

Felton looked up then, his eyes cold. "I'm going to listen to your lungs now. Cough when I tell you to."

And Henry knew he couldn't do it. If the kid had reprimanded him—"I don't think sarcasm is appropriate here"—it would have at least been a response. But this utter dismissal, this treatment as if Henry were a child, or a moron. . . . He couldn't tell this insensitive young boor about the incident in the car, about the fear for his brain. It would degrade him to cooperate with Felton. Maybe DiBella *would* be better, even if he wasn't an M.D.

One doctor down, one to go.

DiBella was better. What he was not, was organized.

At Redborn Memorial Hospital he said, "Ah, Dr. Erdmann, Carrie. Welcome. I'm afraid there's been a mix-up with Diagnostic Imaging. I thought I had the fMRI booked for you but they seem to have scheduled me out, or something. So we can do the Asher-Peyton scan but not the deep imaging. I'm sorry, I—" He shrugged helplessly and ran his hand through his hair.

Carrie tightened her mouth to a thin line. "Dr. Erdmann came all the way over here for your MRI, Dr. DiBella."

"Jake, please. I know. And we do the Asher-Peyton scan back at St. Sebastian's. I really am sorry."

Carrie's lips didn't soften. It always surprised Henry how fierce she could be in defense of her "resident-assignees." Why was usually gentle Carrie being so hard on this young man?

"I'll meet you back at St. Sebastian's," DiBella said humbly.

Once there, he affixed electrodes on Henry's skull and neck, eased a helmet over his head, and sat at a computer whose screen faced away from Henry. After the room was darkened, a series of pictures projected onto one white wall: a chocolate cake, a broom, a chair, a car, a desk, a glass: four or five dozen images. Henry had to do nothing except sit there, and he grew bored. Eventually the pictures grew more interesting, interspersing a house fire, a war scene, a father hugging a child, Rita Hayworth. Henry chuckled. "I didn't think your generation even knew who Rita Hayworth was."

"Please don't talk, Dr. Erdmann."

The session went on for twenty minutes. When it was over, DiBella removed the helmet and said, "Thank you so much. I really appreciate this." He began removing electrodes from Henry's head. Carrie stood, looking straight at Henry.

Now or never.

"Dr. DiBella," Henry said, "I'd like to ask you something. Tell you something, actually. An incident that happened yesterday. Twice." Henry liked the word "incident"; it sounded objective and explainable, like a police report.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"The first time I was standing in my apartment, the second time riding in a car with Carrie. The first incident was mild, the second more pronounced. Both times I felt something move through my mind, like a shock-wave of sorts, leaving no after-effects except perhaps a slight fatigue. No abilities seem to be impaired. I'm hoping you can tell me what happened."

DiBella paused, an electrode dangling from his hand. Henry could smell the gooeey gel on its end. "I'm not an M.D., as I told you yesterday. This sounds like something you should discuss with your doctor at St. Sebastian's."

Carrie, who had been upset that Henry had not done just that, said, "In the car he sort of lost consciousness and his eyes rolled back in his head."

Henry said, "My doctor wasn't available this morning, and you are. Can you just tell me if that experience sounds like a stroke?"

"Tell me about it again."

Henry did, and DiBella said, "If it had been a TIA—a mini-stroke—you wouldn't have had such a strong reaction, and if it had been a more serious stroke, either ischemic or hemorrhagic, you'd have been left with at least temporary impairment. But you could have experienced a cardiac event of some sort, Dr. Erdmann. I think you should have an EKG at once."

Heart, not brain. Well, that was better. Still, fear slid coldly down Henry's spine, and he realized how much he wanted to go on leading his current life, limited though it was. Still, he smiled and said, "All right."

He'd known for at least twenty-five years that growing old wasn't for sissies.

Carrie canceled her other resident-assignees, checking in with each on

her cell, and shepherded Henry through the endless hospital rituals that followed, administrative and diagnostic and that most ubiquitous medical procedure, waiting. By the end of the day, Henry knew that his heart was fine, his brain showed no clots or hemorrhages, there was no reason for him to have fainted. That's what they were calling it now: a faint, possibly due to low blood sugar. He was scheduled for glucose-tolerance tests next week. Fools. It hadn't been any kind of faint. What had happened to him had been something else entirely, *sui generis*.

Then it happened again, the same and yet completely different.

At nearly midnight Henry lay in bed, exhausted. For once, he'd thought, sleep would come easily. It hadn't. Then, all at once, he was lifted out of his weary mind. This time there was no violent wrenching, no eyes rolling back in his head. He just suddenly wasn't in his darkened bedroom any more, not in his body, not in his mind.

*He was dancing, soaring with pointed toes high above a polished stage, feeling the muscles in his back and thighs stretch as he sat cross-legged on a deep cushion he had embroidered with ball bearings rolling down a factory assembly line across from soldiers shooting at him as he ducked—*

It was gone.

Henry jerked upright, sweating in the dark. He fumbled for the bed lamp, missed, sent the lamp crashing off the nightstand and onto the floor. He had never danced on a stage, embroidered a cushion, worked in a factory, or gone to war. And he'd been awake. Those were memories, not dreams—no, not even memories, they were too vivid for that. They'd been experiences, as vivid and real as if they were all happening now, and all happening simultaneously. *Experiences*. But not his.

The lamp was still glowing. Laboriously he leaned over the side of the bed and plucked it off the floor. As he set it back on the nightstand, it went out. Not, however, before he saw that the plug had been pulled from the wall socket during the fall, well before he bent over to pick it up.

*The ship grew more agitated, the rents in space-time and resulting flop transitions larger. Every aspect of the entity strained forward, jumping through the vacuum flux in bursts of radiation that appeared now near one star system, now another, now in the deep black cold where no stars exerted gravity. The ship could move no quicker without destroying either nearby star systems or its own coherence. It raced as rapidly as it could, sent ahead of itself even faster tendrils of quantum-entangled information. Faster, faster . . .*

*It was not fast enough.*

#### FOUR

**T**hursday morning, Henry's mind seemed to him as clear as ever. After an early breakfast he sat at his tiny kitchen table, correcting physics papers. The apartments at St. Sebastian's each had a small eat-in kitchen, a marginally larger living room, a bedroom and bath. Grab rails, non-skid

flooring, overly cheerful colors, and intercoms reminded the residents that they were old—as if, Henry thought scornfully, any of them were likely to forget it. However, Henry didn't really mind the apartment's size or surveillance. After all, he'd flourished at Los Alamos, crowded and ramshackle and paranoid as the place had been. Most of his life went on inside his head.

For each problem set with incomplete answers—which would probably be all of them except Haldane's, although Julia Hernandez had at least come up with a novel and mathematically interesting approach—he tried to follow the student's thinking, to see where it had gone wrong. After an hour of this, he had gone over two papers. A plane screamed overhead, taking off from the airport. Henry gave it up. He couldn't concentrate.

Outside St. Sebastian's infirmary yesterday, the horrible Evelyn Krenchnoted had said that she didn't have a check-up appointment, but that the doctor was "squeezing her in" because "something strange happened yesterday." She'd also mentioned that the aging-hippie beauty, Erin Whatever-Her-Name-Was, hadn't had a scheduled appointment either.

Once, at a mandatory ambulatory-residents' meeting, Henry had seen Evelyn embroidering.

Anna Chernov, St. Sebastian's most famous resident, was a ballet dancer. Everyone knew that.

He felt stupid even thinking along these lines. What was he hypothesizing here, some sort of telepathy? No respectable scientific study had ever validated such a hypothesis. Also, during Henry's three years at St. Sebastian's—years during which Evelyn and Miss Chernov had also been in residence—he had never felt the slightest connection with, or interest in, either of them.

He tried to go back to correcting problem sets.

The difficulty was, he had two data points, his own "incidents" and the sudden rash of unscheduled doctors' appointments, and no way to either connect or eliminate either one. If he could at least satisfy himself that Evelyn and Erin's doctor visits concerned something other than mental episodes, he would be down to one data point. One was an anomaly. Two were an indicator of . . . something.

This wasn't one of Henry's days to have Carrie's assistance. He pulled himself up on his walker, inched to the desk, and found the Resident Directory. Evelyn had no listings for either cell phone or email. That surprised him; you'd think such a yenta would want as many ways to bother people as possible. But some St. Sebastian's residents were still, after all these decades, wary of any technology they hadn't grown up with. *Fools*, thought Henry, who had once driven four hundred miles to buy one of the first, primitive, put-it-together-yourself kits for a personal computer. He noted Evelyn's apartment number and hobbled toward the elevators.

"Why, Henry Erdmann! Come in, come in!" Evelyn cried. She looked astonished, as well she might. And—oh, God—behind her sat a circle of women, their chairs jammed in like molecules under hydraulic compression, all sewing on bright pieces of cloth.

"I don't want to intrude on you—"

"Oh, it's just the Christmas Elves!" Evelyn cried. "We're getting an ear-

ly start on the holiday wall hanging for the lobby. The old one is getting so shabby."

Henry didn't remember a holiday wall hanging in the lobby, unless she was referring to that garish lumpy blanket with Santa Claus handing out babies to guardian angels. The angels had had tight, cotton-wool hair that made them look like Q-Tips. He said, "Never mind, it's not important."

"Oh, come on in! We were just talking about—and maybe you have more information on it!—this fabulous necklace that Anna Chernov has in the office safe, the one the czar gave—"

"No, no, I have no information. I'll—"

"But if you just—"

Henry said desperately, "I'll call you later."

To his horror, Evelyn lowered her eyes and murmured demurely, "All right, Henry," while the women behind her tittered. He backed away down the hall.

He was pondering how to discover Erin's last name when she emerged from an elevator. "Excuse me!" he called the length of the corridor. "May I speak to you a moment?"

She came toward him, another book in her hand, her face curious but reserved. "Yes?"

"My name is Henry Erdmann. I'd like to ask what will, I know, sound like a very strange question. Please forgive my intrusiveness, and believe that I have a good reason for asking. You had an unscheduled appointment with Dr. Felton yesterday?"

Something moved behind her eyes. "Yes."

"Did your reason for seeing him have to do with any sort of . . . of mental experience? A small seizure, or an episode of memory aberration, perhaps?"

Erin's ringed hand tightened on her book. He noted, numbly, that today it seemed to be a novel. She said, "Let's talk."

"I don't believe it," he said. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Bass, but it sounds like rubbish to me."

She shrugged, a slow movement of thin shoulders under her peasant blouse. Her long printed skirt, yellow flowers on black, swirled on the floor. Her apartment looked like her: bits of cloth hanging on the walls, a curtain of beads instead of a door to the bedroom, Hindu statues and crystal pyramids and Navaho blankets. Henry disliked the clutter, the childishness of the décor, even as he felt flooded by gratitude toward Erin Bass. She had released him. Her ideas about the "incidents" were so dumb that he could easily dismiss them, along with anything he might have been thinking which resembled them.

"There's an energy in the universe as a whole," she'd said. "When you stop resisting the flow of life and give up the grasping of *trishna*, you awaken to that energy. In popular terms, you have an 'out-of-body experience,' activating stored karma from past lives and fusing it into one moment of transcendent insight."

Henry had had no transcendental insight. He knew about energy in the universe—it was called electromagnetic radiation, gravity, the strong and weak nuclear forces—and none of it had karma. He didn't believe in rein-

carnation, and he hadn't been out of his body. Throughout all three "incidents," he'd felt his body firmly encasing him. He hadn't left; other minds had somehow seemed to come in. But it was all nonsense, an aberration of a brain whose synapses and axons, dendrites and vesicles, were simply growing old.

He grasped his walker and rose. "Thanks anyway, Mrs. Bass. Good-bye."

"Again, call me 'Erin.' Are you sure you wouldn't like some green tea before you go?"

"Quite sure. Take care."

He was at the door when she said, almost casually, "Oh, Henry? When I had my own out-of-body Tuesday evening, there were others with me in the awakened state. . . . Were you ever closely connected with—I know this sounds odd—a light that somehow shone more brightly than many suns?"

He turned and stared at her.

"This will take about twenty minutes," DiBella said as Henry slid into the MRI machine. He'd had the procedure before and disliked it just as much then, the feeling of being enclosed in a tube not much larger than a coffin. Some people, he knew, couldn't tolerate it at all. But Henry'd be damned if he let a piece of machinery defeat him, and anyway the tube didn't enclose him completely; it was open at the bottom. So he pressed his lips together and closed his eyes and let the machine swallow his strapped-down body.

"You okay in there, Dr. Erdmann?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. Excellent. Just relax."

To his own surprise, he did. In the tube, everything seemed very remote. He actually dozed, waking twenty minutes later when the tube slid him out again.

"Everything look normal?" he asked DiBella, and held his breath.

"Completely," DiBella said. "Thank you, that's a good baseline for my study. Your next one, you know, will come immediately after you view a ten-minute video. I've scheduled that for a week from today."

"Fine." *Normal*. Then his brain was okay, and this weirdness was over. Relief turned him jaunty. "I'm glad to assist your project, doctor. What is its focus, again?"

"Cerebral activation patterns in senior citizens. Did you realize, Dr. Erdmann, that the over-sixty-five demographic is the fastest-growing one in the world? And that globally there are now 140 million people over the age of eighty?"

Henry hadn't realized, nor did he care. The St. Sebastian's aide came forward to help Henry to his feet. He was a dour young man whose name Henry hadn't caught. DiBella said, "Where's Carrie today?"

"It's not her day with me."

"Ah." DiBella didn't sound very interested; he was already prepping his screens for the next volunteer. Time on the MRI, he'd told Henry, was tight, having to be scheduled between hospital use.

The dour young man—Darryl? Darrin? Dustin?—drove Henry back to



St. Sebastian's and left him to make his own way upstairs. In his apartment, Henry lowered himself laboriously to the sofa. Just a few minutes' nap, that's all he needed, even a short excursion tired him so much now—although it would be better if Carrie had been along, she always took such good care of him, such a kind and dear young woman. If he and Ida had ever had children, he'd have wanted them to be like Carrie. If that bastard Jim Peltier ever again tried to—

It shot through him like a bolt of lightning.

Henry screamed. This time the experience *hurt*, searing the inside of his skull and his spinal cord down to his tailbone. No dancing, no embroidering, no meditating—and yet others were there, not as individuals but as a collective sensation, a shared pain, making the pain worse by pooling it. He couldn't stand it, he was going to die, this was the end of—

The pain was gone. It vanished as quickly as it came, leaving him bruised inside, throbbing as if his entire brain had undergone a root canal. His gorge rose, and just in time he twisted his aching body to the side and vomited over the side of the sofa onto the carpet.

His fingers fumbled in the pocket of his trousers for the St. Sebastian's panic button that Carrie insisted he wear. He found it, pressed the center, and lost consciousness.

## FIVE

Carrie went home early. Thursday afternoons were assigned to Mrs. Lopez, and her granddaughter had showed up unexpectedly. Carrie suspected that Vicky Lopez wanted money again, since that seemed to be the only time she did turn up at St. Sebastian's, but that was not Carrie's business. Mrs. Lopez said happily that Vicky could just as easily take her shopping instead of Carrie, and Vicky agreed, looking greedy. So Carrie went home.

If she'd been fortunate enough to have a grandmother—to have any relatives besides her no-good step-brothers in California—she would treat that hypothetical grandmother better than did Vicky, she of the designer jeans and cashmere crew necks and massive credit-card debt. Although Carrie wouldn't want her grandmother to be like Mrs. Lopez, either, who treated Carrie like not-very-clean hired help.

Well, she *was* hired help, of course. The job as a St. Sebastian's aide was the first thing she'd seen in the Classifieds the day she finally walked out on Jim. She grabbed the job blindly, like a person going over a cliff who sees a fragile branch growing from crumbly rock. The weird thing was that after the first day, she knew she was going to stay. She liked old people (most of them, anyway). They were interesting and grateful (most of them, anyway)—and safe. During that first terrified week at the YMCA, while she searched for a one-room apartment she could actually afford, St. Sebastian's was the one place she felt safe.

Jim had changed that, of course. He'd found out the locations of her job and apartment. Cops could find anything.

She unlocked her door after making sure the dingy corridor was empty, slipped inside, shot the deadbolt, and turned on the light. The only window faced an air shaft, and the room was dark even on the brightest day. Carrie had done what she could with bright cushions and Salvation Army lamps and dried flowers, but dark was dark.

"Hello, Carrie," Jim said.

She whirled around, stifling a scream. But the sickening thing was the rest of her reaction. Unbidden and hated—God, how hated!—but still there was the sudden thrill, the flash of excitement that energized every part of her body. *"That's not unusual,"* her counselor at the Battered Women's Help Center had said, *"because frequently an abuser and his victim are both fully engaged in the struggle to dominate each other. How triumphant do you feel when he's in the apology-and-wooing phase of the abuse cycle? Why do you think you haven't left before now?"*

It had taken Carrie so long to accept that. And here it was again. Here Jim was again.

"How did you get in?"

"Does it matter?"

"You got Kelsey to let you in, didn't you?" The building super could be bribed to almost anything with a bottle of Scotch. Although maybe Jim hadn't needed that; he had a badge. Not even the charges she'd brought against him, all of which had been dropped, had affected his job. Nobody on the outside ever realized how common domestic violence was in cops' homes.

Jim wasn't in uniform now. He wore jeans, boots, a sports coat she'd always liked. He held a bouquet of flowers. Not supermarket carnations, either: red roses in shining gold paper. "Carrie, I'm sorry I startled you, but I wanted so bad for us to talk. Please, just let me have ten minutes. That's all. Ten minutes isn't much to give me against three years of marriage."

"We're not married. We're legally separated."

"I know. *I know*. And I deserve that you left me. I know that now. But just ten minutes. Please."

"You're not supposed to be here at all! There's a restraining order against you—and you're a cop!"

"I know. I'm risking my career to talk to you for ten minutes. Doesn't that say how much I care? Here, these are for you."

Humbly, eyes beseeching, he held out the roses. Carrie didn't take them.

"You blackened my eye the last time we 'talked,' you bastard!"

"I know. If you knew how much I've regretted that. . . . If you had any idea how many nights I laid awake hating myself for that. I was out of my mind, Carrie. I really was. But it taught me something. I've changed. I'm going to A.A. now, I've got a sponsor and everything. I'm working my program."

"I've heard this all before!"

"I know. I know you have. But this time is different." He lowered his eyes, and Carrie put her hands on her hips. Then it hit her: She had said all this before, too. She had stood in this scolding, one-up stance. He had stood in his humble stance, as well. This was the apology-and-wooing stage that the counselor had talked about, just one more scene in their endless script. And she was eating it up as if it had never happened be-



fore, was reveling in the glow of righteous indignation fed by his groveling. Just like the counselor had said.

She was so sickened at herself that her knees nearly buckled.

"Get out, Jim."

"I will. I *will*. Just tell me that you heard me, that there's some chance for us still, even if it's a chance I don't deserve. Oh, Carrie—"

"Get out!" Her nauseated fury was at herself.

"If you'd just—"

"Out! Out now!"

His face changed. Humility was replaced by astonishment—this wasn't how their script went—and then by rage. He threw the flowers at her. "You won't even *listen* to me? I come here goddamn apologizing and you won't even listen? What makes you so much better than me, you fucking bitch you're nothing but a—"

Carrie whirled around and grabbed for the deadbolt. He was faster. Faster, stronger, and *that* was the old script, too, how could she forget for even a half second he—

Jim threw her to the floor. Did he have his gun? Would he—she caught a glimpse of his face, so twisted with rage that he looked like somebody else, even as she was throwing up her arms to protect her head. He kicked her in the belly. The pain was astonishing. It burned along her body she was burning she couldn't breathe she was going to die. . . . His boot drew back to kick her again and Carrie tried to scream. No breath came. This was it then no no *no*—

Jim crumpled to the floor.

Between her sheltering arms, she caught sight of his face as he went down. Astonishment gaped open the mouth, widened the eyes. The image clapped onto her brain. His body fell heavily on top of hers, and didn't move.

When she could breathe again, she crawled out from under him, whimpering with short guttural sounds: *uh uh uh*. Yet a part of her brain worked clearly, coldly. She felt for a pulse, held her fingers over his mouth to find a breath, put her ear to his chest. He was dead.

She staggered to the phone and called 911.

Cops. Carrie didn't know them; this wasn't Jim's precinct. First uniforms and then detectives. An ambulance. A forensic team. Photographs, fingerprints, a search of the one-room apartment, with her consent. You have the right to remain silent. She didn't remain silent, didn't need a lawyer, told what she knew as Jim's body was replaced by a chalked outline and neighbors gathered in the hall. And when it was finally, finally over and she was told that her apartment was a crime scene until the autopsy was performed and where could she go, she said, "St. Sebastian's. I work there."

"Maybe you should call in sick for this night's shift, ma'am, it's—"

"I'm going to St. Sebastian's!"

She did, her hands shaky on the steering wheel. She went straight to Dr. Erdmann's door and knocked hard. His walker inched across the floor, inside. Inside, where it was safe.

"Carrie! What on Earth—"

"Can I come in? Please? The police—"

"Police?" he said sharply. "What police?" Peering around her as if he expected to see blue uniforms filling the hall. "Where's your coat? It's fifty degrees out!"

She had forgotten a coat. Nobody had mentioned a coat. *Pack a bag*, they said, but nobody had mentioned a coat. Dr. Erdmann always knew the temperature and barometer reading, he kept track of such things. Belatedly, and for the first time, she burst into tears.

He drew her in, made her sit on the sofa. Carrie noticed, with the cold clear part of her mind that still seemed to be functioning, that there was a very wet spot on the carpet and a strong odor, as if someone had scrubbed with disinfectant. "Could I . . . could I have a drink?" She hadn't known she was going to say that until the words were out. She seldom drank. Too much like Jim.

*Jim . . .*

The sherry steadied her. Sherry seemed so civilized, and so did the miniature glass he offered it in. She breathed easier, and told him her story. He listened without saying a word.

"I think I'm a suspect," Carrie said. "Well, of course I am. He just dropped dead when we were fighting . . . but I never so much as laid a hand on him. I was just trying to protect my head and . . . Dr. Erdmann, what is it? You're white as snow! I shouldn't have come, I'm sorry, I—"

"Of course you should have come!" he snapped, so harshly that she was startled. A moment later he tried to smile. "Of course you should have come. What are friends for?"

Friends. But she had other friends, younger friends. Joanne and Connie and Jennifer . . . not that she had seen any of them much in the last three months. It had been Dr. Erdmann she'd thought of, first and immediately. And now he looked so . . .

"You're not well," she said. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I ate something bad at lunch, in the dining room. Half the building started vomiting a few hours later. Evelyn Krenchnoted and Gina Martinelli and Erin Bass and Bob Donovan and Al Cosmano and Anna Chernov. More."

He watched her carefully as he recited the names, as if she should somehow react. Carrie knew some of those people, but mostly just to say hello. Only Mr. Cosmano was on her resident-assignee list. Dr. Erdmann looked stranger than she had ever seen him.

He said, "Carrie, what time did Jim . . . did he drop dead? Can you fix the exact time?"

"Well, let me see . . . I left here at two and I stopped at the bank and the gas station and the convenience store, so maybe 3:00 or 3:30? Why?"

Dr. Erdmann didn't answer. He was silent for so long that Carrie grew uneasy. She shouldn't have come, it was a terrible imposition, and anyway there was probably a rule against aides staying in residents' apartments, what was she *thinking*—

"Let me get blankets and pillow for the sofa," Dr. Erdmann finally said, in a voice that still sounded odd to Carrie. "It's fairly comfortable. For a sofa."

## SIX

Not possible. The most ridiculous coincidence. That was all—coincidence. Simultaneity was not cause-and-effect. Even the dimmest physics undergraduate knew that.

In his mind, Henry heard Richard Feynman say about string theory, "I don't like that they're not calculating anything. I don't like that they don't check their ideas. I don't like that for anything that disagrees with an experiment, they cook up an explanation. . . . The first principle is that you must not fool yourself—and you are the easiest person to fool." Henry hadn't liked Feynman, whom he'd met at conferences at Cal Tech. A buffoon, with his bongo drums and his practical jokes and his lock-picking. Undignified. But the brilliant buffoon had been right. Henry didn't like string theory, either, and he didn't like ideas that weren't calculated, checked, and verified by experimental data. Besides, the idea that Henry had somehow killed Jim Peltier with his *thoughts* . . . preposterous.

Mere thoughts could not send a bolt of energy through a distant man's body. But the bolt itself wasn't a "cooked-up" idea. It had happened. Henry had felt it.

DiBella had said that Henry's MRI looked completely normal.

Henry lay awake much of Thursday night, which made the second night in a row, while Carrie slept the oblivious deep slumber of the young. In the morning, before she was awake, he dressed quietly, left the apartment with his walker, and made his way to the St. Sebastian's Infirmary. He expected to find the Infirmary still crammed with people who'd vomited when he had yesterday afternoon. He was wrong.

"Can I help you?" said a stout, middle-aged nurse carrying a breakfast tray. "Are you feeling ill?"

"No, no," Henry said hastily. "I'm here to visit someone. Evelyn Krench-noted. She was here yesterday."

"Oh, Evelyn's gone back. They've all gone back, the food poisoning was so mild. Our only patients here now are Bill Terry and Anna Chernov." She said the latter name the way many of the staff did, as if she'd just been waiting for an excuse to speak it aloud. Usually this irritated Henry—what was ballet dancing compared to, say, physics?—but now he seized on it.

"May I see Miss Chernov, then? Is she awake?"

"This is her tray. Follow me."

The nurse led the way to the end of a short corridor. Yellow curtains, bedside table, monitors and IV poles; the room looked like every other hospital room Henry had ever seen, except for the flowers. Masses and masses of flowers, bouquets and live plants and one huge floor pot of brass holding what looked like an entire small tree. A man, almost lost amid all the flowers, sat in the room's one chair.

"Here's breakfast, Miss Chernov," said the nurse reverently. She fussed with setting the tray on the table, positioning it across the bed, removing the dish covers.

"Thank you." Anna Chernov gave her a gracious, practiced smile, and

looked inquiringly at Henry. The other man, who had not risen at Henry's entrance, glared at him.

They made an odd pair. The dancer, who looked younger than whatever her actual age happened to be, was more beautiful than Henry had realized, with huge green eyes over perfect cheekbones. She wasn't hooked to any of the machinery on the wall, but a cast on her left leg bulged beneath the yellow bedcover. The man had a head shaped like a garden trowel, an aggressively bristly gray crew cut, and small suspicious eyes. He wore an ill-fitting sports coat over a red T-shirt and jeans. There seemed to be grease under his fingernails—grease, in St. Sebastian's? Henry would have taken him for part of the maintenance staff except that he looked too old, although vigorous and walker-free. Henry wished him at the devil. This was going to be difficult enough without an audience.

"Miss Chernov, please forgive the intrusion, especially so early, but I think this is important. My name is Henry Erdmann, and I'm a resident on Three."

"Good morning," she said, with the same practiced, detached graciousness she'd shown the nurse. "This is Bob Donovan."

"Hi," Donovan said, not smiling.

"Are you connected in any way with the press, Mr. Erdmann? Because I do not give interviews."

"No, I'm not. I'll get right to the point, if I may. Yesterday I had an attack of nausea, just as you did, and you also, Mr. Donovan. Evelyn Krenchnoted told me."

Donovan rolled his eyes. Henry would have smiled at that if he hadn't felt so tense.

He continued, "I'm not sure the nausea *was* food poisoning. In my case, it followed a . . . a sort of attack of a quite different sort. I felt what I can only describe as a bolt of energy burning along my nerves, very powerfully and painfully. I'm here to ask if you felt anything similar."

Donovan said, "You a doctor?"

"Not an M.D. I'm a physicist."

Donovan scowled savagely, as if physics were somehow offensive. Anna Chernov said, "Yes, I did, Dr. Erdmann, although I wouldn't describe it as 'painful.' It didn't hurt. But a 'bolt of energy along the nerves'—yes. It felt like—" She stopped abruptly.

"Yes?" Henry said. His heart had started a slow, irregular thump in his chest. Someone else had also felt that energy.

But Anna declined to say what it had felt like. Instead she turned her head to the side. "Bob? Did you feel anything like that?"

"Yeah. So what?"

"I don't know what," Henry said. All at once, leaning on the walker, his knees felt wobbly. Anna noticed at once. "Bob, bring Dr. Erdmann the chair, please."

Donovan got up from the chair, dragged it effortlessly over to Henry, and stood sulkily beside a huge bouquet of autumn-colored chrysanthemums, roses, and dahlias. Henry sank onto the chair. He was at eye level with the card to the flowers, which said FROM THE ABT COMPANY. GET WELL SOON!

Anna said, "I don't understand what you're driving at, Dr. Erdmann. Are you saying we all had the same disease and it wasn't food poisoning? It was something with a . . . a surge of energy followed by nausea?"

"Yes, I guess I am." He couldn't tell her about Jim Peltier. Here, in this flower-and-antiseptic atmosphere, under Donovan's pathetic jealousy and Anna's cool courtesy, the whole idea seemed unbelievably wild. Henry Erdmann did not like wild ideas. He was, after all, a *scientist*.

But that same trait made him persist a little longer. "Had you felt anything like that ever before, Miss Chernov?"

"Anna," she said automatically. "Yes, I did. Three times before, in fact. But much more minor, and with no nausea. I think they were just passing moments of dozing off, in fact. I've been laid up with this leg for a few days now, and it's been boring enough that I sleep a lot."

It was said without self-pity, but Henry had a sudden glimpse of what being "laid up" must mean to a woman for whom the body, not the mind, had been the lifelong source of achievement, of pleasure, of occupation, of self. What, in fact, growing old must mean to such a woman. Henry had been more fortunate; his mind was his life source, not his ageing body, and his mind still worked fine.

Or did it, if it could hatch that crackpot hypothesis? What would Feynman, Teller, Gell-Mann have said? Embarrassment swamped him. He struggled to rise.

"Thank you, Miss Chernov, I won't take up any more of your—"

"I felt it, too," Donovan said suddenly. "But only two times, like you said. Tuesday and yesterday afternoon. What are you after here, doc? You saying there's something going around? Is it dangerous?"

Henry, holding onto the walker, turned to stare at him. "You felt it, too?"

"I just told you I did! Now you tell me—is this some new catching, dangerous-like disease?"

The man was frightened, and covering fear with belligerence. Did he even understand what a "physicist" was? He seemed to have taken Henry for some sort of specialized physician. What on Earth was Bob Donovan doing with Anna Chernov?

He had his answer in the way she dismissed them both. "No, Bob, there's no dangerous disease. Dr. Erdmann isn't in medicine. Now if you don't mind, I'm very tired and I must eat or the nurse will scold me. Perhaps you'd better leave now, and maybe I'll see you both around the building when I'm discharged." She smiled wearily.

Henry saw the look on Donovan's face, a look he associated with undergraduates: hopeless, helpless lovesickness. Amid those wrinkles and sags, the look was ridiculous. And yet completely sincere, poor bastard.

"Thank you again," Henry said, and left as quickly as his walker would allow. How dare she treat him like a princess dismissing a lackey? And yet . . . he'd been the intruder on her world, that feminine arena of flowers and ballet and artificial courtesy. A foreign, somehow repulsive world. Not like the rigorous masculine brawl of physics.

But he'd learned that she'd felt the "energy," too. And so had Donovan, and at the exact same times as Henry. Several more data points for . . . what?

He paused on his slow way to the elevator and closed his eyes.

\* \* \*

When Henry reached his apartment, Carrie was awake. She sat with two strangers, who both rose as Henry entered, at the table where Henry and Ida had eaten dinner for fifty years. The smell of coffee filled the air.

"I made coffee," Carrie said. "I hope you don't mind . . . This is Detective Geraci and Detective Washington. Dr. Erdmann, this is his apartment . . ." She trailed off, looking miserable. Her hair hung in uncombed tangles and some sort of black make-up smudged under her eyes. Or maybe just tiredness.

"Hello, Dr. Erdmann," the male detective said. He was big, heavily muscled, with beard shadow even at this hour—just the sort of thuggish looks that Henry most mistrusted. The black woman was much younger, small and neat and unsmiling. "We had a few follow-up questions for Ms. Vesey about last night."

Henry said, "Does she need a lawyer?"

"That's up to your granddaughter, of course," at the same moment that Carrie said, "I told them I don't want a lawyer," and Henry was adding, "I'll pay for it." In the confusion of sentences, the mistake about "granddaughter" went uncorrected.

Geraci said, "Were you here when Ms. Vesey arrived last night?"

"Yes," Henry said.

"And can you tell us your whereabouts yesterday afternoon, sir?"

Was the man a fool? "Certainly I can, but surely you don't suspect *me*, sir, of killing Officer Peltier?"

"We don't suspect anyone at this point. We're asking routine questions, Dr. Erdmann."

"I was in Redborn Memorial from mid-afternoon until just before Carrie arrived here. The Emergency Room, being checked for a suspected heart attack. Which," he added hastily, seeing Carrie's face, "I did not have. It was merely severe indigestion brought on by the attack of food poisoning St. Sebastian's suffered yesterday afternoon."

Hah! Take that, Detective Thug!

"Thank you," Geraci said. "Are you a physician, Dr. Erdmann?"

"No. A doctor of physics."

He half-expected Geraci to be as ignorant about that as Bob Donovan had been, but Geraci surprised him. "Experimental or theoretical?"

"Theoretical. Not, however, for a long time. Now I teach."

"Good for you." Geraci rose, Detective Washington just a beat behind him. In Henry's hearing the woman had said nothing whatsoever. "Thank you both. We'll be in touch about the autopsy results."

In the elevator, Tara Washington said, "These old-people places give me the creeps."

"One day you and—"

"Spare me the lecture, Vince. I know I have to get old. I don't have to like it."

"You have a lot of time yet," he said, but his mind clearly wasn't on the rote reassurance. "Erdmann knows something."

"Yeah?" She looked at him with interest; Vince Geraci had a reputation

in the department for having a "nose." He was inevitably right about things that smelled hinky. Truth was, she was a little in awe of him. She'd only made detective last month and was fucking lucky to be partnered with Geraci. Still, her natural skepticism led her to say, "That old guy? He sure the hell didn't do the job himself. He couldn't squash a cockroach. You talking about a hit for hire?"

"Don't know," Geraci considered. "No. Something else. Something more esoteric."

Tara didn't know what "esoteric" meant, so she kept quiet. Geraci was smart. Too smart for his own good, some uniforms said, but that was just jealousy talking, or the kind of cops that would rather smash down doors than solve crimes. Tara Washington knew she was no door-smasher. She intended to learn everything she could from Vince Geraci, even if she didn't have his vocabulary. Everything, and then some. She intended to someday be just as good as he was.

Geraci said, "Let's talk to the staff about this epidemic of food poisoning."

But the food poisoning checked out. And halfway through the morning, the autopsy report was called in. Geraci shut his cell and said, "Peltier died of 'a cardiac event.' Massive and instantaneous heart failure."

"Young cop like that? Fit and all?"

"That's what the M.E. says."

"So no foul play. Investigation closed." In a way, she was disappointed. The murder of a cop by a battered wife would have been pretty high-profile. That's why Geraci had been assigned to it.

"Investigation closed," Geraci said. "But just the same, Erdmann knows something. We're just never gonna find out what it is."

## SEVEN

**J**ust before noon on Friday, Evelyn lowered her plump body onto a cot ready to slide into the strange-looking medical tube. She had dressed up for the occasion in her best suit, the polyester blue one with all the blue lace, and her good cream pumps. Dr. DiBella—such a good-looking young man, too bad she wasn't fifty years younger aha ha ha—said, "Are you comfortable, Mrs. Krenchnoted?"

"Call me Evelyn. Yes, I'm fine, I never had one of these—what did you call it?"

"A functional MRI. I'm just going to strap you in, since it's very important you lie completely still for the procedure."

"Oh, yes, I see, you don't want my brain wobbling all over the place while you take a picture of—Gina, you still there? I can't see—"

"I'm here," Gina called. "Don't be scared, Evelyn. Though I walk in the valley of—"

"There's no shadows here and I'm not scared!" Really, sometimes Gina could be Too Much. Still, the MRI tube *was* a bit unsettling. "You just tell me when you're ready to slide me into that thing, doctor, and I'll brace myself. It's tight as a coffin, isn't it? Well, I'm going to be underground a



long time but I don't plan on starting now, aha ha ha! But if I can keep talking to you while I go in—"

"Certainly. Just keep talking." He sounded resigned, poor man. Well, no wonder, he must get bored with doing things like this all the live-long day. She cast around for something to cheer him up.

"You're over at St. Sebastian's a lot now, aren't you, when you're not here that is, did you hear yet about Anna Chernov's necklace?"

"No, what about it? That's it, just hold your head right here."

"It's fabulous!" Evelyn said, a little desperately. He was putting some sort of vise on her head, she couldn't move it at all. Her heart sped up. "Diamonds and rubies and I don't know what all. The Russian czar gave it to some famous ballerina who—"

"Really? Which czar?"

"The czar! Of Russia!" Really, what did the young learn in school these days? "He gave it to some famous ballerina who was Anna Chernov's teacher and she gave it to Anna, who naturally keeps it in the St. Sebastian's safe because just think if it were stolen, it wouldn't do the Home's reputation any good at all and anyway it's absolutely priceless so— oh!"

"You'll just slide in nice and slow, Evelyn. It'll be fine. Close your eyes if that helps. Now, have you seen this necklace?"

"Oh, no!" Evelyn gasped. Her heart raced as she felt the bed slide beneath her. "I'd love to, of course, but Anna isn't exactly friendly, she's pretty stuck-up, well I suppose that comes with being so famous and all but still—Doctor!"

"Do you want to come out?" he said, and she could tell that he was disappointed, she was sensitive that way, and she did want to come out but she didn't want to disappoint him, so . . . "No! I'm fine! The necklace is something I'd really like to see, though, all those diamonds and rubies and maybe even sapphires too, those are my favorite stones with that blue fire in them, I'd really really like to see it—"

She was babbling, but all at once it seemed she *could* see the necklace in her mind, just the way she'd pictured it. A string of huge glowing diamonds and hanging from them a pendant of rubies and sapphires shining like I-don't-know-what but more beautiful than anything she'd ever seen oh she'd love to touch it just once! If Anna Chernov weren't so stuck-up and selfish then maybe she'd get the necklace from the safe and show it to Evelyn let her touch it *get the necklace from the safe* it would surely be the most wonderful thing Evelyn had ever seen or imagined *get the necklace from the safe* —

Evelyn screamed. Pain spattered through her like hot oil off a stove, burning her nerves and turning her mind to a red cloud . . . So much pain! She was going to die, this was it and she hadn't even bought her cemetery plot yet oh God the pain—

Then the pain was gone and she lay sobbing as the bed slid out of the tube. Dr. DiBella was saying something but his voice was far away and growing farther . . . farther . . . farther. . .

Gone.

Henry sat alone, eating a tuna fish sandwich at his kitchen table. Car-

rie had gone to work elsewhere in the building. It had been pleasant having her here, even though of course she—

Energy poured through him, like a sudden surge in household current, and all his nerves *glowed*. That was the only word. No pain this time, but something bright grew in his mind, white and red and blue but certainly not a flag, hard as stones . . . yes, stones . . . jewels . . .

It was gone. An immense lassitude took Henry. He could barely hold his head up, keep his eyes open. It took all his energy to push off from the table, stagger into the bedroom, and fall onto the bed, his mind empty as deep space.

Carrie was filling in at a pre-lunch card game in the dining room, making a fourth at euchre with Ed Rosewood, Ralph Galetta, and Al Cosmano. Mr. Cosmano was her Friday morning resident-assignee. She'd taken him to buy a birthday gift for his daughter in California, to the Post Office to wrap and mail it, and then to the physical therapist. Mr. Cosmano was a complainer. St. Sebastian's was too cold, the doctors didn't know nothing, they wouldn't let you smoke, the food was terrible, he missed the old neighborhood, his daughter insisted on living in California instead of making a home for her old dad, kids these days. . . . Carrie went on smiling. Even Mr. Cosmano was better than being home in the apartment where Jim had died. When her lease was up, she was going to find something else, but in the meantime she had signed up for extra hours at St. Sebastian's, just to not be home.

"Carrie, hearts led," Ed Rosewood said. He was her partner, a sweet man whose hobby was watching C-Span. He would watch anything at all on C-Span, even hearings of the House Appropriations Committee, for hours and hours. This was good for St. Sebastian's because Mr. Rosewood didn't want an aide. He had to be pried off the TV even to play cards once a week. Mike O'Kane, their usual fourth, didn't feel well enough to play today, which was why Carrie sat holding five cards as the kitchen staff clattered in the next room, preparing lunch. Outside a plane passed overhead, droned away.

"Oh, yes," Carrie said, "hearts." She had a heart, thank heavens, since she couldn't remember what was trump. She was no good at cards.

"There's the king."

"Garbage from me."

"Your lead, Ed."

"Ace of clubs."

"Clubs going around. . . . Carrie?"

"Oh, yes, I . . ." Who led? Clubs were the only things on the table. She had no clubs, so she threw a spade. Mr. Galetta laughed.

Al Cosmano said, with satisfaction, "Carrie, you really shouldn't trump your partner's ace."

"Did I do that? Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Rosewood, I—"

Ed Rosewood slumped in his chair, eyes closed. So did Al Cosmano. Ralph Galetta stared dazedly at Carrie, then carefully laid his head on the table, eyes fixed.

"Mr. Cosmano! Help, somebody!"

The kitchen staff came running. But now all three men had their eyes open again, looking confused and sleepy.

"What happened?" demanded a cook.

"I don't know," Carrie said, "they all just got . . . tired."

The cook stared at Carrie as if she'd gone demented. "Tired?"

"Yeah . . . tired," Ed Rosewood said. "I just . . . bye, guys. I'm going to take a nap. Don't want lunch." He rose, unsteady but walking on his own power, and headed out of the dining room. The other two men followed.

"Tired," the cook said, glaring at Carrie.

"All at once! Really, really tired, like a spell of some kind!"

"A simultaneous 'spell,'" the cook said. "Right. You're new here? Well, old people get tired." She walked away.

Carrie wasn't new. The three men hadn't just had normal tiredness. But there was no way to tell this bitch that, no way to even tell *herself* in any terms that made sense. Nothing was right.

Carrie had no appetite for lunch. She fled to the ladies' room, where at least she could be alone.

Vince Geraci's cell rang as he and Tara Washington exited a convenience store on East Elm. They'd been talking to the owner, who may or may not have been involved in an insurance scam. Vince had let Tara do most of the questioning, and she'd felt herself swell like a happy balloon when he said, "Nice job, rookie."

"Geraci," he said into the cell, then listened as they walked. Just before they reached the car, he said, "Okay," and clicked off.

"What do we have?" Tara asked.

"We have a coincidence."

"A coincidence?"

"Yes." The skin on his forehead took on a strange topography. "St. Sebastian's again. Somebody cracked the safe in the office."

"Anything gone?"

"Let's go find out."

Erin Bass woke on her yoga mat, the TV screen a blue blank except for CHANNEL 3 in the upper corner. She sat up, dazed but coherent. Something had happened.

She sat up carefully, her ringed hands lifting her body slowly off the mat. No broken bones, no pain anywhere. Apparently she had just collapsed onto the mat and then stayed out as the yoga tape played itself to an end. She'd been up to the fish posture, so there had been about twenty minutes left on the tape. And how long since then? The wall clock said 1:20. So about an hour.

Nothing hurt. Erin took a deep breath, rolled her head, stood up. Still no pain. And there hadn't been pain when it happened, but there had been something . . . not the calm place that yoga or meditation sometimes took her, either. That place was pale blue, like a restful vista of valleys seen at dusk from a high, still mountain. This was brightly hued, rushing, more like a river . . . a river of colors, blue and red and white.

She walked into the apartment's tiny kitchen, a slim figure in black leo-

tard and tights. She'd missed lunch but wasn't hungry. From the cabinet she chose a chamomile tea, heated filtered water, and set the tea to steep.

That rushing river of energy was similar to what she'd felt before. Henry Erdmann had asked her about it, so perhaps he had felt it this time, as well. Although Henry hadn't seemed accepting of her explanation of *trishna*, grasping after the material moment, versus awakening. He was a typical scientist, convinced that science was the only route to knowledge, that what he could not test or measure or replicate was therefore not true even if he'd experienced it himself. Erin knew better. But there were a lot of people like Henry in this world, people who couldn't see that while rejecting "religion," they'd made a religion of science.

Sipping her tea, Erin considered what she should do next. She wasn't afraid of what had happened. Very little frightened Erin Bass. This astonished some people and confused the rest. But, really, what was there to be afraid of? Misfortune was just one turn of the wheel, illness another, death merely a transition from one state to another. What was due to come, would come, and beneath it all the great flow of cosmic energy would go on, creating the illusion that people thought was the world. She knew that the other residents of St. Sebastian's considered her nuts, pathetic, or so insulated from reality as to be both. ("Trust-fund baby, you know. Never worked a day in her life.") It didn't matter. She'd made herself a life here of books and meditation and volunteering on the Nursing floors, and if her past was far different than the other residents imagined, that was their illusion. She herself never thought about the past. It would come again, or not, as *maya* chose.

Still, something should be done about these recent episodes. They had affected not just her but also Henry Erdmann and, surprisingly, Evelyn Krenchnoted. Although on second thought, Erin shouldn't be surprised. Everyone possessed karma, even Evelyn, and Erin had no business assuming she knew anything about what went on under Evelyn's loud, intrusive surface. There were many paths up the mountain. So Erin should talk to Evelyn as well as to Henry. Perhaps there were others, too. Maybe she should—

Her doorbell rang. Leaving her tea on the table, Erin fastened a wrap skirt over her leotard and went to the door. Henry Erdmann stood there, leaning on his walker, his face a rigid mask of repressed emotion. "Mrs. Bass, there's something I'd like to discuss with you. May I come in?"

A strange feeling came over Erin. Not the surge of energy from the yoga mat, nor the high blue restfulness of meditation: Something else. She'd had these moments before, in which she recognized that something significant was about to happen. They weren't mystical or deep, these occasions; probably they came from nothing more profound than a subliminal reading of body language. But, always, they presaged something life-changing.

"Of course, Dr. Erdmann. Come in."

She held the door open wider, stepping aside to make room for his walker, but he didn't budge. Had he exhausted all his strength? He was ninety, she'd heard, ten years older than Erin, who was in superb shape from a lifetime of yoga and bodily moderation. She had never smoked, drank, over-eaten. All her indulgences had been emotional, and not for a very long time now.

"Do you need help? Can I—"

"No. No." He seemed to gather himself and then inched the walker forward, moving toward her table. Over his shoulder, with a forced afterthought that only emphasized his tension, he said, "Thieves broke into St. Sebastian's an hour and a half ago. They opened the safe in the office, the one with Anna Chernov's necklace."

Erin had never heard of Anna Chernov's necklace. But the image of the rushing river of bright colors came back to her with overwhelming force, and she knew that she had been right: Something had happened, and nothing was ever going to be the same again.

## EIGHT

For perhaps the tenth time, Jake DiBella picked up the fMRI scans, studied them yet again, and put them down. He rubbed his eyes hard with both sets of knuckles. When he took his hands away from his face, his bare little study at St. Sebastian's looked blurry but the fMRI scans hadn't changed. *This is your brain on self-destruction*, he thought, except that it wasn't his brain. It was Evelyn Krenchnoted's brain, and after she recovered consciousness, that tiresome and garrulous lady's brain had worked as well as it ever had.

But the scan was extraordinary. As Evelyn lay in the magnetic imaging tube, everything had changed between one moment and the next. First image: a normal pattern of blood flow and oxygenation, and the next—

"Hello?"

Startled, Jake dropped the printouts. He hadn't even heard the door open, or anyone knock. He really was losing it. "Come in, Carrie, I'm sorry, I didn't. . . . You don't have to do that."

She had bent to pick up the papers that had skidded across his desk and onto the floor. With her other hand she balanced a cardboard box on one hip. As she straightened, he saw that her face was pink under the loose golden hair, so that she looked like an overdone Victorian figurine. The box held a plant, a picture frame, and various other bits and pieces.

*Uh oh.* Jake had been down this road before.

She said, "I brought you some things for your office. Because it looks so, well, empty. Cold."

"Thanks. I actually like it this way." Ostentatiously he busied himself with the printouts, which was also pretty cold of him, but better to cut her off now rather than after she embarrassed herself. As she set the box on a folding chair, he still ignored her, expecting her to leave.

Instead she said, "Are those MRI scans of Dr. Erdmann? What do they say?"

Jake looked up. She was eyeing the printouts, not him, and her tone was neutral, with perhaps just a touch of concern for Dr. Erdmann. He remembered how fond of each other she and Henry Erdmann were. Well, didn't that make Jake just the total narcissist? Assuming every woman was interested in *him*. This would teach him some humility.

Out of his own amused embarrassment, he answered her as he would a colleague. "No, these are Evelyn Krenchnoted's. Dr. Erdmann's were unremarkable but these are quite the opposite."

"They're remarkable? How?"

All at once he found himself eager to talk, to perhaps explain away his own bafflement. He came around the desk and put the scan in her hand. "See those yellow areas of the brain? They're BOLD signals, blood-oxygen-level dependent contrasts. What that means is that at the moment the MRI image was taken, those parts of the subject's brain were active—in this case, *highly* active. And they shouldn't have been!"

"Why not?"

Carrie was background now, an excuse to put into concrete words what should never have existed concretely at all. "Because it's all wrong. Evelyn was lying still, talking to me, inside the MRI tube. Her eyes were open. She was nervous about being strapped down. The scan should show activity in the optical input area of the brain, in the motor areas connected to moving the mouth and tongue, and in the posterior parietal lobes, indicating a heightened awareness of her bodily boundaries. But instead, there's just the *opposite*. A hugely decreased blood flow in those lobes, and an almost total shutdown of input to the thalamus, which relays information coming into the brain from sight and hearing and touch. Also, an enormous—really enormous—*increase* of activity in the hypothalamus and amygdalae and temporal lobes."

"What does all that increased activity mean?"

"Many possibilities. They're areas concerned with emotion and some kinds of imaginative imagery, and this much activation is characteristic of some psychotic seizures. For another possibility, parts of that profile are characteristic of monks in deep meditation, but it takes experienced meditators hours to build to that level, and even so there are differences in pain areas and—anyway, *Evelyn Krenchnoted?*"

Carrie laughed. "Not a likely monk, no. Do Dr. Erdmann's scans show any of that?"

"No. And neither did Evelyn's just before her seizure *or* just after. I'd say temporal lobe epilepsy except—"

"Epilepsy?" Her voice turned sharp. "Does that 'seizure' mean epilepsy?"

Jake looked at her then, really looked at her. He could recognize fear. He said as gently as he could, "Henry Erdmann experienced something like this, didn't he?"

They stared at each other. Even before she spoke, he knew she was going to lie to him. A golden lioness protecting her cub, except here the lioness was young and the cub a withered old man who was the smartest person Jake DiBella had ever met.

"No," she said, "Dr. Erdmann never mentioned a seizure to me."

"Carrie—"

"And you said his MRI looked completely normal."

"It did." Defeated.

"I should be going. I just wanted to bring you these things to brighten up your office."



Carrie left. The box contained a framed landscape he would never hang (a flower-covered cottage, with unicorn), a coffee cup he would never use (JAVA IS JOY IN THE MORNING), a patchwork quilted cushion, a pink African violet, and a pencil cup covered in wallpaper with yellow daisies. Despite himself, Jake smiled. The sheer wrongness of her offerings was almost funny.

Except that nothing was really funny in light of Evelyn Krenchnoted's inexplicable MRI. He needed more information from her, and another MRI. Better yet would be having her hooked to an EEG in a hospital ward for several days, to see if he could catch a definitive diagnosis of temporal-lobe epilepsy. But when he'd phoned Evelyn, she'd refused all further "doctor procedures." Ten minutes of his best persuasion hadn't budged her.

He was left with an anomaly in his study data, a cutesy coffee cup, and no idea what to do next.

"What do we do next?" asked Rodney Caldwell, the chief administrator of St. Sebastian's. Tara Washington looked at Geraci, who looked at the floor.

It was covered with papers and small, uniform, taped white boxes with names written neatly on them in block printing: M. MATTISON. H. GERHARDT. C. GARCIA. One box, however, was open, its lid placed neatly beside it, the tissue paper peeled back. On the tissue lay a necklace, a gold Coptic cross set with a single small diamond, on a thin gold chain. The lid said A. CHERNOV.

"I didn't touch anything," Caldwell said, with a touch of pride. In his fifties, he was a tall man with a long, highly colored face like an animated carrot. "That's what they say on TV, isn't it? Don't touch anything. But isn't it strange that the thief went to all the trouble to 'blow the safe'—" He looked proud of this phrase, too "—and then didn't take anything?"

"Very strange," Geraci said. Finally he looked up from the floor. The safe hadn't been "blown"; the lock was intact. Tara felt intense interest in what Geraci would do next. She was disappointed.

"Let's go over it once more," he said easily. "You were away from your office . . ."

"Yes. I went up to Nursing at 11:30. Beth Malone was on desk. Behind the front desk is the only door to the room that holds both residents' files and the safe, and Beth says she never left her post. She's very reliable. Been with us eighteen years."

Mrs. Malone, who was therefore the prime suspect and smart enough to know it, was weeping in another room. A resigned female uniform handed her tissues as she waited to be interrogated. But Tara knew that, after one look, Geraci had dismissed Malone as the perp. One of those conscientious, middle-aged, always-anxious-to-help do-gooders, she would no more have attempted robbery than alchemy. Most likely she had left her post to do something she was as yet too embarrassed to admit, which was when the thief had entered the windowless back room behind the reception desk. Tara entertained herself with the thought that Mrs. Malone had crept off to meet a lover in the linen closet. She smiled.

"A thought, Detective Washington?" Geraci said.

Damn, he missed *nothing*. Now she would have to come up with some-



thing. The best she could manage was a question. "Does that little necklace belong to the ballerina Anna Chernov?"

"Yes," Caldwell said. "Isn't it lovely?"

To Tara it didn't look like much. But Geraci had raised his head to look at her, and she realized he didn't know that a world-famous dancer had retired to St. Sebastian's. Ballet wasn't his style. It was the first time Tara could recall that she'd known something Geraci did not. Emboldened by this, and as a result of being dragged several times a year to Lincoln Center by an eccentric grandmother, Tara continued. "Is there any resident here that might have a special interest in Anna Chernov? A balletomane—" She hoped she was pronouncing the word correctly, she'd only read it in programs "—or a special friend?"

But Caldwell had stopped listening at "resident." He said stiffly, "None of our residents would have committed this crime, detective. St. Sebastian's is a private community and we screen very carefully for any—"

"May I talk to Ms. Chernov now?" Geraci asked.

Caldwell seemed flustered. "To Anna? But Beth Malone is waiting for . . . oh, all right, if that's the procedure. Anna Chernov is in the Infirmary right now, with a broken leg. I'll show you up."

Tara hoped that Geraci wasn't going to send her to do the useless questioning of Mrs. Malone. He didn't. At the Infirmary door, he said, "Tara, talk to her." Tara would have taken this as a tribute to her knowledge of ballet, except that she had seen Geraci do the same thing before. He liked to observe: the silent listener, the unknown quantity to whoever was being questioned.

As Caldwell explained the situation and made the introductions, Tara tried not to stare at Anna Chernov. She was *beautiful*. Old, yes, seventies maybe, but Tara had never seen anyone old look like that. High cheekbones, huge green eyes, white hair pinned carelessly on top of her head so that curving strands fell over the pale skin that looked not so much wrinkled (though it was) as softened by time. Her hands, long-fingered and slim-wristed, lay quiet on the bedspread, and her shoulders held straight under the white bed jacket. Only the bulging cast on one leg marred the impression of delicacy, of remoteness, and of the deepest sadness that Tara had ever seen. It was sadness for everything, Tara thought confusedly, and couldn't have said what she meant by "everything." Except that the cast was only a small part.

"Please sit down," Anna said.

"Thank you. As Mr. Caldwell said, there's been a break-in downstairs, with the office safe. The only box opened had your name on it, with a gold-and-diamond necklace inside. That is yours, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Is it the one that Tamara Karsavina gave you? That Nicholas II gave her?"

"Yes." Anna looked at Tara more closely, but not less remotely.

"Ms. Chernov, is there anyone you can think of who might have a strong interest in that necklace? A member of the press who's been persistent in asking about it, or someone emailing you about it, or a resident?"

"I don't do email, Miss Washington."

It was "Detective Washington," but Tara let it go. "Still—anyone?"

"No."

Had the dancer hesitated slightly? Tara couldn't be sure. She went on asking questions, but she could see that she wasn't getting anywhere. Anna Chernov grew politely impatient. Why wasn't Geraci stopping Tara? She had to continue until he did—"softening them up," he called it. The pointless questioning went on. Finally, just as Tara was running completely out of things to ask, Geraci said almost casually, "Do you know Dr. Erdmann, the physicist?"

"We've met once," Anna said.

"Is it your impression that he has a romantic interest in you?"

For the first time, Anna looked amused. "I think Dr. Erdmann's only romantic interest is in physics."

"I see. Thank you for your time, Ms. Chernov."

In the hall, Geraci said to Tara, "Ballet. Police work sure isn't what it used to be. You did good, Washington."

"Thank you. What now?"

"Now we find out what resident has a romantic interest in Anna Chernov. It's not Erdmann, but it's somebody."

So Anna *had* hesitated slightly when Tara asked if any resident had a special interest in her! Tara glowed inwardly as she followed Geraci down the hall. Without looking at her, he said, "Just don't let it go to your head."

She said dryly, "Not a chance."

"Good. A cop interested in *ballet* . . . Jesus H. Christ."

*The ship grew agitated. Across many cubic light years between the stars, spacetime itself warped in dangerous ways. The new entity was growing in strength—and it was so far away yet!*

*It was not supposed to occur this way.*

*If the ship had become aware earlier of this new entity, this could have happened correctly, in accord with the laws of evolution. All things evolved—stars, galaxies, consciousness. If the ship had realized earlier that anywhere in this galactic backwater had existed the potential for a new entity, the ship would have been there to guide, to shape, to ease the transition. But it hadn't realized. There had been none of the usual signs.*

*They were happening now, however. Images, as yet dim and one-way, were reaching the ship. More critically, power was being drawn from it, power that the birthing entity had no idea how to channel. Faster, the ship must go faster . . .*

*It could not, not without damaging spacetime irretrievably. Spacetime could only reconfigure so much, so often. And meanwhile—*

*The half-formed thing so far away stirred, struggled, howled in fear.*

## NINE

**H**enry Erdmann was scared.

He could barely admit his fright to himself, let alone show it to the circle of people jammed into his small apartment on Saturday morning.

They sat in a solemn circle, occupying his sofa and armchair and kitchen chairs and other chairs dragged from other apartments. Evelyn Krench-noted's chair crowded uncomfortably close to Henry's right side, her perfume sickly sweet. She had curled her hair into tiny gray sausages. Stan Dzarkis and Erin Bass, who could still manage it, sat on the floor. The folds of Erin's yellow print skirt seemed to Henry the only color amid the ashen faces. Twenty people, and maybe there were more in the building who were afflicted. Henry had called the ones he knew of, who had called the ones they knew of. Missing were Anna Chernov, still in the Infirmary, and Al Cosmano, who had refused to attend.

They all looked at him, waiting to begin.

"I think we all know why we're here," Henry said, and immediately a sense of unreality took him. He didn't understand at all why he was here. The words of Michael Faraday, inscribed on the physics building at UCLA, leapt into his mind: "Nothing is too wonderful to be true." The words seemed a mockery. What had been happening to Henry, to all of them, did not feel wonderful and was "true" in no sense he understood, although he was going to do his damndest to relate it to physics in the only way that hours of pondering had suggested to him. Anything else—anything *less*—was unthinkable.

He continued, "Things have occurred to all of us, and a good first step is to see if we have indeed had the same experiences." *Collect data.* "So I'll go first. On five separate occasions I have felt some force seize my mind and body, as if a surge of energy was going through me, some sort of neurological shock. On one occasion it was painful, on the others not painful but very tiring. Has anyone else felt that?"

Immediately a clamor, which Henry stilled by raising his arm. "Can we start with a show of hands? Anybody else had that experience? Everybody. Okay, let's go around the circle, introducing yourself as we go, starting on my left. Please be as explicit as possible, but only descriptions at this point. No interpretations."

"Damned teacher," someone muttered, but Henry didn't see who and didn't care. His heart had speeded up, and he felt that his ears had somehow expanded around his hearing aid, so as not to miss even a syllable. He had deliberately not mentioned the times of his "seizures," or outside events concurrent with them, so as not to contaminate whatever information would be offered by the others.

"I'm John Kluge, from 4J." He was a heavy, round-faced man with a completely bald head and a pleasant voice used to making itself heard. High-school teacher, Henry guessed. History or math, plus coaching some sort of sports team. "It's pretty much like Henry here said, except I only felt the 'energy' four times. The first was around 7:30 on Tuesday night. The second time woke me Wednesday night at 11:42. I noted the time on my bedside clock. The third time I didn't note the time because I was vomiting after that food poisoning we all got on Thursday, but it was just before the vomiting started, sometime in mid-afternoon. That time the energy surge started near my heart, and I thought it was a heart attack. The last time was yesterday at 11:45 AM, and in addition to the energy, I had a . . . well, a sort of—" He looked embarrassed.

"Please go on, it's important," Henry said. He could hardly breathe.

"I don't want to say a vision, but colors swirling through my mind, red and blue and white and somehow *hard*."

"Anna Chernov's necklace!" Evelyn shrieked, and the meeting fell apart.

Henry couldn't stop the frantic babble. He would have risen but his walker was in the kitchen; there was no room in the crowded living room. He was grateful when Bob Donovan put two fingers in his mouth and gave a whistle that could have deafened war dogs. "Hey! Shut up or nobody's gonna learn nothing!"

Everyone fell silent and glared resentfully at the stocky man in baggy chinos and cheap acrylic sweater. Donovan scowled and sat back down. Henry leapt into the quiet.

"Mr. Donovan is right, we won't learn anything useful this way. Let's resume going around the circle, with no interruptions, please. Mrs. Bass?"

Erin Bass described essentially the same events as John Kluge, without the Wednesday night incident but with the addition of the earlier, slight jar Henry had felt as he let Carrie into his apartment Tuesday before class. She described this as a "whisper in my mind." The next sixteen people all repeated the same experiences on Thursday and Friday, although some seemed to not have felt the "energy" on Tuesday, and some not on Tuesday or Wednesday. Henry was the only one to feel all five instances. Throughout these recitations, Evelyn Krenchnoted several times rose slightly in her chair, like a geyser about to burst. Henry did *not* want her to interrupt. He put a restraining hand on her arm, which was a mistake as she immediately covered his hand with her own and squeezed affectionately.

When it was finally Evelyn's turn, she said, "None of you had pain this last time like Henry did on Thursday—except me! I was having a medical MIT at the hospital and I was inside the machine and the pain was horrible! Horrible! And then—" she paused dramatically "—and then I saw Anna Chernov's necklace right at the time it was being stolen! And so did all of you—that was the 'hard colors,' John! Sapphires and rubies and diamonds!"

Pandemonium again. Henry, despite his growing fear, groaned inwardly. Why Evelyn Krenchnoted? Of all the unreliable witnesses . . .

"I saw it! I saw it!" Evelyn shrieked. Gina Martinelli had begun to pray in a loud voice. People jabbered to each other or sat silent, their faces gone white. A woman that Henry didn't know reached with shaking hand into her pocket and pulled out a pill bottle. Bob Donovan raised his fingers to his lips.

Before Donovan's whistle could shatter their eardrums again, Erin Bass rose gracefully, clapped her hands, and cried surprisingly loudly, "Stop! We will get nowhere this way! Evelyn has the floor!"

Slowly the din subsided. Evelyn, who now seemed more excited than frightened by the implication of what she'd just said, launched into a long and incoherent description of her "MIT," until Henry stopped her the only way he could think of, which was to take her hand. She squeezed it again, blushed, and said, "Yes, dear."

Henry managed to get out, "Please. Everyone. There must be an expla-

nation for all this." But before he could begin it, Erin Bass turned from aide to saboteur.

"Yes, and I think we should go around the circle in the same order and offer those explanations. But *briefly*, before too many people get too tired. John?"

Kluge said, "It could be some sort of virus affecting the brain. Contagious. Or some pollutant in the building."

Which causes every person to have the exact same hallucinations and a locked safe to open? Henry thought scornfully. The scorn steadied him. He needed steadying; every person in the room had mentioned feeling the Thursday-afternoon "energy" start in his or her heart, but no one except Henry knew that at that moment Jim Peltier was having an inexplicable heart attack as he battered Carrie.

Erin said, "What we see in this world is just *maya*, the illusion of permanence when in fact, all reality is in constant flux and change. What's happening here is beyond the world of intellectual concepts and distinctions. We're getting glimpses of the mutable nature of reality, the genuine undifferentiated 'suchness' that usually only comes with nirvana. The glimpses are imperfect, but for some reason our collective karma has afforded them to us."

Bob Donovan, next in the circle, said irritably, "That's just crap. We all got some brain virus, like Kluge here said, and some junkie cracked the office safe. The cops are investigating it. We should all see a doctor, except they can't never do anything to cure people anyway. And the people who had pain, Henry and Evelyn, they just got the disease worse."

Most people around the circle echoed the brain-disease theory, some with helpless skepticism, some with evident relief at finding any sort of explanation. A woman said slowly, "It could be the start of Alzheimer's." A man shrugged and said, "As God wills." Another just shook his head, his eyes averted.

Gina Martinelli said, "It is the will of God! These are the End Times, and we're being given signs, if only we would listen! 'Ye shall have tribulations ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.' Also—"

"It might be the will of God, Gina," interrupted Evelyn, unable to restrain herself any longer, "but it's mighty strange anyway! Why, I saw that necklace in my mind plain as day, and at just that moment it was being stolen from the safe! To my mind, that's not God, and not the devil neither or the robbery would have been successful, you see what I mean? The devil knows what he's doing. No, this was a message, all right, but from those who have gone before us. My Uncle Ned could see spirits all the time, they trusted him, I remember one time we all came down to breakfast and the cups had all been turned upside down when nobody was in the room and Uncle Ned, he said—"

Henry stopped listening. Ghosts. God. Eastern mysticism. Viruses. Alzheimer's. Nothing that fit the facts, that adhered even vaguely to the laws of the universe. These people had the reasoning power of termites.

Evelyn went on for a while, but eventually even she noticed that her

audience was inattentive, dispirited, or actually asleep. Irene Bromley snored softly in Henry's leather armchair. Erin Bass said, "Henry?"

He looked at them hopelessly. He'd been going to describe the two-slit experiments on photons, to explain that once you added detectors to measure the paths of proton beams, the path became pre-determined, even if you switched on the detector *after* the particle had been fired. He'd planned on detailing how that astonishing series of experiments changed physics forever, putting the observer into basic measurements of reality. Consciousness was woven into the very fabric of the universe itself, and consciousness seemed to him the only way to link these incredibly disparate people and the incredible events that had happened to them.

Even to himself, this "explanation" sounded lame. How Teller or Feynman would have sneered at it! Still, although it was better than anything he'd heard here this morning, he hated to set it out in front of these irrational people, half ignoramuses and the other half nutcases. They would all just reject it, and what would be gained?

But he had called this meeting. And he had nothing else to offer.

Henry stumbled through his explanation, trying to make the physics as clear as possible. Most of the faces showed perfect incomprehension. He finished with, "I'm not saying there's some sort of affecting of reality going on, through group consciousness." But wasn't that exactly what he was saying? "I don't believe in telekinesis or any of that garbage. The truth is, I don't know what's happening. But something is."

He felt a complete fool.

Bob Donovan snapped, "None of you know nothing. I been listening to all of you, and you haven't even got the facts right. I *seen* Anna Chernov's necklace. The cops showed it to me yesterday when they was asking me some questions. It don't got no sapphires or rubies, and just one tiny diamond. You're full of it, Evelyn, to think your seizure had anything to do with anything—and how do we know you even felt any pain at the 'very second' the safe was being cracked? All we got's your word."

"Are you saying I'm a liar?" Evelyn cried. "Henry, tell him!"

Tell him what? Startled, Henry just stared at her. John Kluge said harshly, "I don't believe Henry Erdmann is lying about his pain," and Evelyn turned from Donovan to Kluge.

"You mean you think *I* am? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Kluge started to tell her who he was: among other things, a former notary public. Other people began to argue. Evelyn started to cry, and Gina Martinelli prayed loudly. Erin Bass rose and slipped out the front door. Others followed. Those that remained disputed fiercely, the arguments growing more intense as they were unable to convince their neighbors of their own theories. Somewhere among the anger and contempt, Carrie Vesey appeared by Henry's side, her pretty face creased with bewildered concern, her voice high and strained.

"Henry? What on Earth is going on in here? I could hear the noise all the way down the hall. . . . What is this all about?"

"Nothing," he said, which was the stupidest answer possible. Usually the young regarded the old as a separate species, as distant from their own concerns as trilobites. But Carrie had been different. She had always



treated Henry as inhabiting the same world as herself, with the same passions and quirks and aims and defeats. This was the first time he had ever seen Carrie look at him as both alien and unsound, and it set the final seal on this disastrous meeting.

"But, Henry—"

"I said it's nothing!" he shouted at her. "Nothing at all! Now just leave me the hell alone!"

## TEN

Carrie stood in the ladies' room off the lobby, pulling herself together. She was *not* going to cry. Even if Dr. Erdmann had never spoken to her like that before, even if ever since Jim's death she had felt as if she might shatter, even if . . . everything, she was *not going to cry*. It would be ridiculous. She was a professional—well, a professional aide anyway—and Henry Erdmann was an old man. Old people were irritable sometimes. This whole incident meant nothing.

Except that she knew it did. She had stood outside Dr. Erdmann's door for a long time as people slipped out, smiling at her vaguely, and Evelyn Krenchnoted babbled on inside. The unprecedented meeting had first piqued her curiosity—Henry Erdmann, hosting a party at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning? Then, as she realized what Evelyn was saying, disbelief took Carrie. Evelyn meant . . . Evelyn thought . . . and even Dr. Erdmann believed that "something" had been happening, something weird and unexplainable and supernatural, at the moment that Evelyn was under the MRI . . . *Henry!*

But Jake DiBella had been upset by Evelyn's scans.

The door of the ladies' opened and the first of the Saturday visitors entered, a middle-aged woman and a sulky teenage girl. "Honestly, Hannah," the woman said, "it's only an hour out of your precious day and it won't kill you to sit with your grandmother and concentrate on someone else besides yourself for a change. If you'd just—"

Carrie went to DiBella's office. He was there, working at his desk. No sign of her picture, cushion, coffee cup; she couldn't help her inevitable, stupid pang. He didn't want them. Or her. Another failure.

"Dr. DiBella—"

"Jake. Remember?" And then, "Carrie, what is it?"

"I just came from Dr. Erdmann's apartment. They were having a meeting, about twenty people, all of them who've felt these 'seizures' or whatever they are, all at the same time. Like the one you captured on Evelyn's MRI scan."

He stared at her. "What do you mean, 'at the same time'?"

"Just what I said." She marveled at her own tone—none of her shakiness showed. "They said that at the exact same time that Evelyn was showing all that weird activity under the MRI, each of them was feeling it, too, only not so strong. And it was the exact same time that Anna Chernov's necklace was being stolen. And they all saw the necklace in their



minds." Only—hadn't Mr. Donovan said that the necklace looked different from what Evelyn said? Confusion took Carrie.

Jake looked down at whatever he was writing, back at Carrie, down again at his notes. He came around the desk and closed his office door. Taking her arm, he sat her gently in the visitor's chair, unadorned by her cushion. Despite herself, she felt a tingle where his hand touched her.

"Dr. Erdmann was involved in this? Tell me again. Slowly, Carrie. Don't leave anything out."

Evelyn Krenchnoted made her way to Gina Martinelli's apartment on Five. Really, Henry had been unbearably rude—to that poor young girl, to everybody at the meeting, and especially to Evelyn herself. He hadn't comforted her when that awful Donovan man called her a liar, he hadn't put his hand on hers again, he'd just yelled and yelled—and just when things between them had been going so well!

Evelyn needed to talk to Gina. Not that Gina had been any help at the meeting, not with all that praying. Gina was really a lot smarter than she looked, she'd been a part-time tax preparer once, but hardly anybody knew it because Gina never opened her mouth except to pray. Not that there was anything wrong with praying, of course! Evelyn certainly believed in God. But you had to help Him along a little if you really wanted something. You couldn't expect the Lord to do everything.

Evelyn had even curled her hair for Henry.

"Gina? Sweetie? Can I come in?"

"You're already in," Gina said. She had to speak loudly because she had Frank Sinatra on the record player. Gina loved Frank Sinatra. For once she wasn't reading her Bible, which Evelyn thought was a good sign. She lowered her bulk onto Gina's sofa.

"So what did you think of that meeting?" Evelyn said. She was looking forward to a good two-three hours of rehashing, sympathy, and gossip. It would make her feel a lot better. Less creepy. Less afraid.

But instead, Gina said, "There was a message on the machine when I got back here. Ray is coming next week."

Oh, God, Gina's son. Who was only after her money. Ray hadn't visited in over a year, and now that Gina had told him she was leaving everything to the daughter . . . and there was a lot of everything to leave. Gina's late husband had made major money in construction.

"Oh, sweetie," Evelyn said, a little perfunctorily. Ordinarily she would have adored discussing Gina's anguish; for one thing, it made Evelyn glad she had never had kids. But now, with so much else going on—Henry and the attempted robbery and Evelyn's seizure and the strange comments at the meeting —

Frank Sinatra sang about ants and rubber tree plants. Gina burst into tears.

"Oh, sweetie," Evelyn repeated, got up to put her arms around Gina, and resigned herself to hearing about Ray Martinelli's selfishness.

Bob Donovan sat beside Anna Chernov's bed in the Infirmary. The man simply could not take a hint. She would either have to snub him outright

or tell him in so many words to stop visiting her. Even the sight of him, squat and toad-faced and clumsy, made her shudder. Unfair, but there it was.

She had danced with so many beautiful men.

Which had been the best? Frederico, partnering her in *La Valse*—never had she been lifted so effortlessly. Jean, in *Scotch Symphony*, had been equally breathtaking. But the one she always returned to was Bennet. After she'd left the New York City Ballet for American Ballet Theater and her career had really taken off, they'd always danced together. Bennet, so dazzling as Albrecht in *Giselle*. . . . Guesting at a gala at the Paris Opera, they'd had seventeen curtain calls and—

Her attention was reclaimed by something Bob Donovan said.

"Could you repeat that, please, Bob?"

"What? Old Henry's crackpot theory? Science gibberish!"

"Nonetheless, would you repeat it?" She managed a smile.

He responded to the smile with pathetic eagerness. "Okay, yeah, if you want. Erdmann said, lemme think . . ." He screwed up his already crevassed face in an effort to remember. Although she was being unkind again. He probably wasn't all that bad looking, among his own class. And was she any better? These days she couldn't bear to look in a mirror. And the sight of the ugly cast on her leg filled her with despair.

"Erdmann said there was some experiments in physics, something with two slips, where people's consciences changed the path of some little . . . particles . . . by just thinking about them. Or maybe it was watching them. And that was the link between everybody who had so-called 'energy' at the same time. Group conscience. A new thing."

*Consciousness*, Anna translated. Group consciousness. Well, was that so strange? She had felt it more than once on stage, when a group of dancers had transcended what they were individually, had become a unity moving to the music in the creation of beauty. Such moments had, for her, taken the place of religion.

Bob was going on now about what other people at the meeting had said, offering up ungrammatical accounts in a desperate bid to please her, but even as she recognized this, Anna had stopped listening. She thought instead about Bennet, with whom she'd had such fantastic chemistry on and off stage, Bennet lifting her in the *grand pas de deux* of Act II, rosin from the raked stage rising around her like an angelic cloud, herself soaring and almost flying . . .

"Tell me again," Jake said.

"Again?" This was the third time! Not that Carrie really minded. She hadn't had his total attention—anybody's total attention—like this since Jim died. Not that she wanted Jim back. . . . She shuddered even as she went through it all again. By the end, she was belligerent.

"Why? Are you saying you believe all this stuff about a group consciousness?"

"No. Of course not. Not without confirmation . . . but Erdmann is a scientist. What other data does he have that he isn't telling you?"

"I don't know what you mean." And she didn't; this conversation was

beyond her. Photon detectors, double-slit experiments, observational pre-determination . . . Her memory was good, but she knew she lacked the background to interpret the terms. Her own ignorance made her angry.

"Henry had two other experiences of 'energy' when he was with you, you said. Were there others when he was away from you?"

"How should I know? You better ask him!"

"I will. I'll ask them all."

"It sounds stupid to me." Immediately she was frightened by her own tone. But Jake just looked at her thoughtfully.

"Well, it sounds stupid to me, too. But Henry is right about one thing—*something* is happening. There's hard data in the form of Evelyn's MRI, in the fact that the safe was opened without the lock being either tampered with or moved to the right combination—"

"It *did*?"

"The detective told me, when he was asking questions yesterday. Also, I got the physician here to let me look at the lab results for everybody admitted to the infirmary Thursday afternoon. Professional courtesy. There was no food poisoning."

"There wasn't?" All at once Carrie felt scared.

"No." DiBella sat thinking for a long while. She scarcely dared breathe. Finally he said slowly, as if against his own will or better judgment—and that much she understood, anyway— "Carrie, have you ever heard of the principle of emergent complexity?"

"I did *everything* for that boy," Gina sobbed. "Just everything!"

"Yes, you did," said Evelyn, who thought Gina had done too much for Ray. Always lending him money after he lost each job, always letting him move back home and trash the place. What that kid had needed—and bad—was a good hiding, that's what.

"Angela didn't turn out this way!"

"No." Gina's daughter was a sweetie. Go figure.

"And now I just get it settled in my mind that he's out of my life, I come to grips with it, and he says he's flying back here to see 'his old ma' and he loves me! He'll just stir everything up again like he did when he got home from the Army, and when he divorced Judy, and when I had to find that lawyer for him in New York. . . . Evelyn, nobody, but *nobody*, can rip you up inside like your child!"

"I know," said Evelyn, who didn't. She went on making little clucking noises while Gina sobbed. A plane roared overhead, and Frank Sinatra sang about it having been a very good year when he was twenty-one.

Bob Donovan took Anna's hand. Gently she pulled it away. The gentleness was for her, not him—she didn't want a scene. His touch repelled her. But oh, Bennet's touch . . . or Frederico's. . . Still, it was the dancing she missed. And now she would never dance again. She might, the doctors said, not even walk without a limp.

Never dance. Never feel her legs spring into a *ballotté* or soar in the exuberance of a *flick jeté*, back arched and arms thrown back, an arrow in ecstatic flight.

\* \* \*

"Carrie, have you ever heard of the principle of 'emergent complexity?'"

"No." Jake DiBella was going to make her feel dumb again. But he didn't mean to do that, and as long as she could sit here in his office with him, she would listen. Maybe he needed someone to listen. Maybe he needed her. And maybe he would say something that would help her make it all right with Dr. Erdmann.

Jake licked his lips. His face was still paper white. "Emergent complexity' means that as an evolving organism grows more complex, it develops processes that wouldn't seem implied by the processes it had in simpler form. In other words, the whole becomes greater than the sum of the parts. Somewhere along the line, our primitive human ancestors developed self-awareness. Higher consciousness. That was a new thing in evolution."

Old knowledge stirred in Carrie's mind. "There was a pope—I was raised Catholic—some pope, one of the John-Pauls maybe, said there was a point where God infused a soul into an animal heritage. So evolution wasn't really anti-Catholic."

Jake seemed to be looking through her, at something only he could see. "Exactly. God or evolution or some guy named Fred—however it happened, consciousness did emerge. And if, now, the next step in complexity is emerging . . . if that . . ."

Carrie was angered, either by his line of thought or by his ignoring her; she wasn't sure which. She said sharply, "But why now? Why *here*?"

Her question brought his gaze back to her. He took a long time to answer, while a plane droned overhead on the flight path out of the airport. Carrie held her breath.

But all he said was, "I don't know."

Gina had worked herself up to such a pitch that she wasn't even praying. Ray, Ray, Ray—this wasn't what Evelyn wanted to talk about. But she had never seen Gina like this. All at once Gina cried passionately, drowning out Sinatra singing "Fly Me to the Moon," "I wish he weren't coming! I wish his plane would just go on to another city or something, just not land here! I don't want him here!"

Never dance again. And the only love available from men like Bob Donovan. . . . No. No. Anna would rather be dead.

"Well, I don't believe it!" Carrie said. "Emerging complexity—I just don't believe it's happening at St. Sebastian's!"

"Neither do I," said Jake. For the first time since she'd entered his office, he smiled at her.

Outside the building, a boom sounded.

Carrie and Jake both looked toward the door. Carrie thought first of terrorism, a car bomb or something, because everybody thought first of terrorism these days. But terrorism at an assisted living facility was ridiculous. It was a gas main exploding, or a bus crash just outside, or . . .

Henry Erdmann appeared in the open doorway to the office. He didn't have his walker with him. He sagged against the doorjamb, his sunken

eyes huge and his mouth open. Before Carrie could leap up to help him and just before he slumped to the floor, he croaked, "Call the police. We just brought down a plane."

*Anguish ripped through the ship. Not its own agony, but the Other's. No guidance, no leading, it was raging wild and undisciplined. If this went on, it might weaken the ship too much for the ship to ever help it.*

*If this went on, the Other could damage spacetime itself.*

*The ship could not let that happen.*

## ELEVEN

When Henry Erdmann collapsed, DiBella moved swiftly to the old man. Carrie stood frozen—stupid! Stupid! "Get the doctor," Jake cried. And then, "Go, Carrie. He's alive."

She ran out of Jake's office, nearly tripping over the walker Henry had left in the hallway. He must have been coming to see Jake when it happened—when *what* happened? She raced to the lobby and the call phone, her mind so disordered that only as she shoved open the double doors did she realize that of course it would have been faster to hit Henry's panic button—Jake would do that—but Henry seldom wore his panic button, he—

She stopped cold, staring.

The lobby was full of screaming people, mostly visitors. Among them, old people lay fallen to the floor or slumped in wheelchairs. It was Saturday morning and on Saturday morning relatives arrived to take their mothers and grandfathers and great-grandmothers for brunch, for a drive, for a visit home . . . Bundled in sweaters and jackets and shawls, the seniors had all collapsed like so many bundles of dropped laundry. St. Sebastian's nurses, aides, and even desk volunteers bent ineffectually over the victims.

Fear roiled Carrie's stomach, but it also preternaturally heightened her perceptions.

Mr. Aberstein, a St. Sebastian's resident even though he was only sixty-seven, stood unaffected by the elevators. Mrs. Kelly sat alert in her wheelchair, her mouth a wide pink O. She was seventy-one. Mr. Schur . . .

"Nurse! Come quick, please, it's Dr. Erdmann!" Carrie caught at the sleeve of a passing nurse in purple scrubs, but he shook her off and raced to an old woman lying on the floor. Everyone here was too busy to help Carrie. She ran back to Jake's office.

Henry lay quietly on the floor. Jake had turned him face up and put a cushion—her cushion, Carrie thought numbly, the patchwork one she'd brought Jake—under Henry's feet. Henry wasn't wearing his panic button. She gasped, "No one can come, it's happened to all of them—"

"All who?" Jake said sharply.

She answered without thinking. "All of them over eighty. Is Henry—"

"He's breathing normally. His color's good, and he's not clammy. I don't think he's in shock. He's just . . . out. *All of them over eighty?*"

"Yes. No. I don't know, I mean, about the age, but all the older ones in

the lobby just collapsed and the younger residents seem fine. . . . Jake, what is it?"

"I don't know. Carrie, do this now: Go to one of the common rooms and turn the TV to the local news channel. See if there's been a . . . a plane crash—"

He stopped. Both of them heard the sirens.

Henry did not wake. All of Redborn Memorial Hospital's ambulances had gone to the crash site. The St. Sebastian's staff moved afflicted residents to the dining room, which looked like a very peaceful war hospital. The residents didn't wake, moan, or need emergency treatment with the exception of one woman who had broken a hip falling to the floor. She was sent over to Memorial. Monitors couldn't be spared from the Nursing floor, where nearly everyone had fallen into the coma, but a few spare monitors were carried down from the infirmary. They showed no anomalies in heart rate or blood pressure.

Relatives summoned family doctors, sat by cots, screamed at St. Sebastian's staff, who kept repeating, "Redborn Memorial is aware of the situation and they'll get the St. Sebastian's residents over there as soon as they can. *Please*, sir, if you'd just—"

Just be patient. Just believe that we're doing our best. Just be reassured by your mother's peaceful face. Just accept that we don't know any more than you do. Just leave me alone!

Carrie checked on her resident-assignees, one by one. They were all affected, most collapsed in their apartments. They were all moved into the infirmary. They were all over eighty.

She was hurrying from Al Cosmano's apartment—empty, he must have been elsewhere when it happened—back to the infirmary when a man caught at her arm. "Hey! Ms. Vesey!"

One of the detectives who'd investigated Jim's death. Carrie's belly clenched. "Yes?"

"Where do I find the hospital administrator? Caldwell?"

"He's not here, he went out of town for the weekend, they sent for him—why?"

"I need to see him. Who's in charge? And what the hell happened here?"

So not about Jim's death. Still—a cop. Some part of her mind shuddered—Jim had been a cop—but at the same time, she seized on this. Official authority. Someone who investigated and found answers. Security. There was a reason she'd married Jim in the first place.

She said as calmly as she could manage, "We've had an . . . an epidemic of collapses among the very old. All at the same time. About a half hour ago."

"Disease?"

"No." She heard how positive she sounded. Well, she was positive. "When the plane went down."

He looked baffled, as well he might. She said, "I'll take you to Dr. Jamison. He's the St. Sebastian's physician."

Jamison wasn't in the dining room. Carrie, leading Detective Geraci, found the doctor in the kitchen, in a shouting match with Jake DiBella.



"No, damn it! You're not going to further upset the relatives for some stupid, half-baked theory—No!" Jamison stalked off.

Carrie said, "Dr. Jamison, this is—" He pushed past her, heading back to his patients. She expected the detective to follow him, but instead Geraci said to Jake, "Who are you?"

"Who wants to know?"

She had never seen Jake so rude. But he was angry and frustrated and scared—they were all scared.

"Detective Geraci, RPD. You work here?"

Carrie said quickly, before the two men could get really nasty, "This is Dr. DiBella. He's doing a medical research project at St. Sebastian's, on . . . on brain waves."

Geraci said, "I received an anonymous call. Me, not the Department, on my cell, from the St. Sebastian's front desk. The caller said there was information here about the plane crash. You know anything about that, doctor?"

Carrie saw that Vince Geraci believed Jake did have information. How did she know that? How did *he* know that? But it was there in every line of the detective's alert body: He knew that Jake knew something.

Jake didn't answer, just stared at Geraci. Finally Geraci said, "The plane went down half a mile from here. A U.S. Air commuter plane carrying forty-nine passengers, including thirty-one members of the Aces High Senior Citizen Club. They were on a three-day trip to the casinos at Atlantic City. Everyone on board is dead."

Jake said, "I can't talk to you now. I have to take some brain scans while these people are unconscious. After that idiot Jamison realizes what I'm doing and throws me out, we can talk. Carrie, I'll need your help. Go to my office and put all the equipment in the corner onto the dolly, throw a blanket over it, and bring it the back way into the kitchen. Quickly!"

She nodded and hurried off, so fast that she didn't realize Geraci was behind her until they reached Jake's office.

"Let me get that, it's heavy," he said.

"No, it's not." She lugged the console onto its dolly. "Shouldn't you be asking people questions?"

"I am. Does DiBella always order you around like that?"

Did he? She hadn't noticed. "No." She added the helmet and box of peripherals on top of the console, then looked around for a blanket. There wasn't one.

"Do you work for DiBella or for St. Sebastian's?"

"St. Sebastian's. I have to go to the linen closet."

When she returned with a blanket, Geraci was reading the papers on Jake's desk. Wasn't that illegal? Carrie threw the blanket over the equipment. Geraci grabbed the handle of the dolly before she could.

"You need me," he said. "Anybody stops you, I'll just flash my badge."

"Okay," she said ungraciously. She could have done this, for Jake, by herself.

They brought the equipment into the kitchen. Jake set it up on the counter, ignoring the cook who said helplessly, "So nobody's having lunch, then?" All at once she ripped off her apron, flung it onto the floor, and walked out.



Jake said to Carrie, "Hold the door." He slipped through to the dining room and, a moment later, wheeled in a gurney with an elderly woman lying peacefully on it. "Who is she, Carrie?"

"Ellen Parminter." After a moment she added, "Eighty-three." Jake grunted and began attaching electrodes to Mrs. Parminter's unconscious head.

Geraci said, "Come with me, Carrie."

"No." Where did she get the *nerve*? But, somehow, he brought that out in her.

He only smiled. "Yes. This is an official police investigation, as of this minute."

She went, then, following him back to Jake's office. Carrie was shaking, but she didn't want him to see that. He did, though; he seemed to see everything. "Sit down," he said gently. "There, behind the desk—you didn't like me reading DiBella's papers before, did you? It's legal if they're in plain sight. You seem like a really good observer, Carrie. Now, please tell me everything that's been happening here. From the very beginning, and without leaving anything out. Start with why you told DiBella that woman's age. Does her age matter to what he's doing?"

Did it? She didn't know. How could it . . . people aged at such different rates! Absolute years meant very little, except that —

"Carrie?"

All at once it seemed a relief to be able to pour it all out. Yes, he was trained to get people to talk, she knew that, and she didn't really trust his sudden gentleness. It was merely a professional trick. But if she told it all, that might help order her chaotic thoughts. And maybe, somehow, it might help the larger situation, too. All those people dead on the plane—

She said slowly, "You won't believe it."

"Try me anyway."

"I don't believe it."

This time he just waited, looking expectant. And it all poured out of her, starting with Henry's "seizure" on the way home from the university. The vomiting epidemic among seven or so patients, that wasn't the food poisoning that St. Sebastian's said it was. Evelyn Krenchnoted's functional MRI. Anna Chernov's necklace, what Evelyn thought the necklace looked like and what Bob Donovan said it really was. The secret meeting this morning in Henry's apartment. What Carrie had overheard: Henry's words about photons and how human observation affected the paths of fundamental particles. Jake's lecture on "emergent complexity." Henry's appearance at Jake's office, saying just before he collapsed, "Call the police. We just brought down a plane." The mass collapse of everyone over eighty and of no one younger than that. The brain scans Jake was taking now, undoubtedly to see if they looked normal or like Evelyn's. The more Carrie talked, the more improbable everything sounded.

When she finished, Geraci's face was unreadable.

"That's it," she said miserably. "I have to go see how Henry is."

"Thank you, Carrie." His tone was unreadable. "I'm going to find Dr. Jamison now."

He left, but she stayed. It suddenly took too much energy to move. Car-

rie put her head in her hands. When she straightened again, her gaze fell on Jake's desk.

He'd been writing when she'd burst in with the news of the meeting in Henry's apartment. Writing on paper, not on a computer: thick pale green paper with a faint watermark. The ink was dark blue. "My dearest James, I can't tell you how much I regret the things I said to you on the phone last night, but, love, please remember—"

Carrie gave a short, helpless bark of laughter. *My dearest James. . . .* God, she was such a fool!

She shook her head like a dog spraying off water, and went to look for Henry.

*The new being was quiet now. That made this a good time to try to reach it. That was always best done through its own culture's symbols. But the ship had had so little time to prepare . . . This should have been done slowly, over a long time, a gradual interaction as the new entity was guided, shaped, made ready. And the ship was still so far away.*

*But it tried, extending itself as much as possible, searching for the collective symbols and images that would have eased a normal transition—  
—and roiled in horror.*

## TWELVE

Evelyn Krenchnoted lay on a cot jammed against the dining room window. She lay dreaming, unaware of the cool air seeping through the glass, or the leaves falling gold and orange in the tiny courtyard beyond. In her dream she walked on a path of light. Her feet made no sound. She moved toward more light, and somewhere in that light was a figure. She couldn't see it or hear it, but she knew it was there. And she knew who it was.

It was someone who really, truly, finally would listen to her.

Al Cosmano squirmed in his sleep. "He's waking," a nurse said.

"No, he's not." Dr. Jamison, passing yet again among the rows of cots and gurneys and pallets on the floor, his face weary. "Some of them have been doing that for hours. As soon as the ambulances return, move this row to the hospital."

"Yes, doctor."

Al heard them and didn't hear them. He was a child again, running along twilight streets toward home. His mother was there, waiting. Home . . .

The stage was so bright! The stage manager must have turned up the lights, turned them up yet again—the whole stage was light. Anna Chernov couldn't see, couldn't find her partner. She had to stop dancing.

*Had to stop dancing.*

She stood lost on the stage, lost in the light. The audience was out there somewhere in all that brightness, but she couldn't see them any more than she could see Bennet or the corps de ballet. She felt the audience,

though. They were there, as bright as the stage, and they were old. Very, very old, as old as she was, and like her, beyond dancing.

She put her hands over her face and sobbed.

Erin Bass saw the path, and it led exactly where she knew it would: deeper into herself. That was where the buddha was, had always been, would always be. Along this path of light, curving and spiraling deeper into her own being, which was all being. All around her were the joyful others, who were her just as she was them—

A jolt, and she woke in an ambulance, her arms and legs and chest strapped down, a young man leaning over her saying, "Ma'am?" The path was gone, the others gone, the heavy world of *maya* back again around her, and a stale taste in her dehydrated mouth.

Lights and tunnels—where the hell was he? An A-test bunker, maybe, except no bunker was ever this brightly lit, and where was Teller or Mark or Oppie? But, no, Oppie hadn't ever worked on this project, Henry was confused, that was it, he was just confused—

And then he wasn't.

He woke all at once, a wrenching transition from sleep-that-wasn't-really-sleep to full alertness. In fact, his senses seemed preternaturally sharp. He felt the hard cot underneath his back, the slime of drool on his cheek, the flatness of the dining-room fluorescent lights. He heard the roll of rubber gurney wheels on the low-pile carpet and the clatter of cutlery in the kitchen dishwashers. He smelled Carrie's scent, wool and vanilla and young skin, and he could have described every ligament of her body as she sat on the chair next to his cot in the dining room of St. Sebastian's, Detective Geraci beside her.

"Henry?" Carrie whispered.

He said, "It's coming. It's almost here."

*The Ship withdrew all contact. It had never encountered anything like this before. The pre-being did not coalesce.*

*Its components were not uniform, but scattered among undisciplined and varied matter-specks who were wildly heterozygotic. Unlike the components of every other pre-being that ship had detected, had guided, had become. All the other pre-ships had existed as one on the matter plane, because they were alike in all ways. These, too, were alike, built of the same physical particles and performing the same physical processes, but somewhere something had gone very wrong, and from that uniform matter they had not evolved uniform consciousness. They had no harmony. They used violence against each other.*

*Possibly they could, if taken in, use that violence against the ship.*

*Yet the ship couldn't go away and leave them. Already they were changing spacetime in their local vicinity. When their melding had advanced farther, the new being could be a dangerous and powerful entity. What might it do?*

*The ship pondered, and feared, and recoiled from what might be necessary: the destruction of what should have been an integral part of itself.*

## THIRTEEN

Jake DiBella clutched the printouts so hard that the stiff paper crumpled in his hand. Lying on the sofa, Henry Erdmann frowned at the tiny destruction. Carrie had pulled her chair close enough to hold Henry's hand, while that RPD detective, Geraci, stood at the foot of the couch. What was he doing here, anyway? DiBella didn't know, but he was too agitated to care for more than a fleeting second.

Carrie said to Henry, "I still think you should go to the hospital!"

"I'm not going, so forget it." The old man struggled to sit up. She would have stopped him, but Geraci put a hand on her shoulder and gently restrained her. *Throwing around his authority*, DiBella thought.

Henry said, "Why at St. Sebastian's?"

The same question that Carrie had asked. DiBella said, "I have a theory." His voice sounded strange to himself. "It's based on Carrie's observation that nobody under eighty has been . . . affected by this. If it is some sort of uber-consciousness that's . . . that's approaching Earth . . ." He couldn't go on. It was too silly.

It was too real.

Henry Erdmann was apparently not afraid of either silliness or reality—which seemed to have become the same thing. Henry said, "You mean it's coming here because 'uber-consciousness' emerges only among the old, and nowadays there's more old than ever before."

"For the first time in history, you over-eighties exceed one percent of the population. A hundred forty million people worldwide."

"But that still doesn't explain why here. Or why us."

"For God's sake, Henry, everything has to start somewhere!"

Geraci said, surprising DiBella, "All bifurcation is local. One lungfish starts to breathe more air than water. One caveman invents an axe. There's always a nexus. Maybe that nexus is you, Dr. Erdmann."

Carrie tilted her head to look up at Geraci.

Henry said heavily, "Maybe so. But I'm not the only one. I wasn't the main switch for the energy that brought down that airplane. I was just one of the batteries linked in parallel."

*The science analogies comfort Erdmann*, DiBella thought. He wished something would comfort him.

Carrie said, "I think Evelyn was the switch to open the safe for Anna Chernov's necklace."

Geraci's face sharpened. But he said, "That doesn't really make sense. I can't go that far."

Henry's sunken eyes grew hard. "You haven't had to travel as far as I have in order to get to this point, young man. Believe me about that. But I *experienced* the . . . the consciousness. That data is anecdotal but real. And those brain scans that Dr. DiBella is mangling there aren't even anecdotal. They're hard data."

True enough. The brain scans DiBella had taken of the unconscious oldsters, before that irate idiot Jamison had discovered him at work and thrown him out, were cruder versions of Evelyn Krenchnoted's under the

fMRI. An almost total shutdown of the thalamus, the relay station for sensory information flowing into the brain. Ditto for the body-defining posterior parietal lobes. Massive activity in the back of the brain, especially in the tempoparietal regions, amygdalae, and hippocampus. The brain scan of an epileptic mystical state on speed. And as unlike the usual scan for the coma-state as a turtle was to a rocketship to the stars.

DiBella put his hands to his face and pulled at his skin, as if that might rearrange his thoughts. When he'd dropped his hands, he said slowly, "A single neuron isn't smart, isn't even a very impressive entity. All it really does is convert one type of electrical or chemical signal into another. That's it. But neurons connected together in the brain can generate incredibly complex states. You just need enough of them to make consciousness possible."

"Or enough old people for this 'group consciousness'?" Carrie said. "But why only old people?"

"How the hell should I know?" DiBella said. "Maybe the brain needs to have stored enough experience, enough sheer *time*."

Geraci said, "Do you read Dostoevsky?"

"No," DiBella said. He didn't like Geraci. "Do *you*?"

"Yes. He said there were moments when he felt a 'frightful' clarity and rapture, and that he would give his whole life for five seconds of that and not feel he was paying too much. Dostoevsky was an epileptic."

"I know he was an epileptic!" DiBella snapped.

Carrie said, "Henry, can you sense it now? That thing that's coming?"

"No. Not at all. Obviously it's not quantum-entangled in any classical sense."

"Then maybe it's gone away."

Henry tried to smile at her. "Maybe. But I don't think so. I think it's coming for us."

"What do you mean, 'coming for you'?" Geraci said skeptically. "It's not a button man."

"I don't know what I mean," Henry said irritably. "But it's coming, and soon. It can't afford to wait long. Look what we did . . . that plane . . ."

Carrie's hand tightened on Henry's fingers. "What will it do when it gets here?"

"I don't know. How could I know?"

"Henry—" Jake began.

"I'm more worried about what *we* may do before it arrives."

Geraci said, "Turn on CNN."

DiBella said pointedly, "Don't you have someplace you should be, Detective?"

"No. Not if this really is happening."

To which there was no answer.

At 9:43 PM, the power grid went down in a city two hundred miles away. "No evident reason," said the talking head on CNN, "given the calm weather and no sign of any—"

"Henry?" Carrie said.

"I . . . I'm all right. But I felt it."

Jake said, "It's happening farther away now. That is, if it was . . . if that was . . ."

"It was," Henry said simply. Still stretched full-length on the sofa, he closed his eyes. Geraci stared at the TV. None of them had wanted any food.

At 9:51, Henry's body jerked violently and he cried out. Carrie whimpered, but in a moment Henry said, "I'm . . . conscious." No one dared comment on his choice of word. Seven minutes later, the CNN anchor announced breaking news: a bridge over the Hudson River had collapsed, plunging an Amtrak train into the dark water.

Over the next few minutes, Henry's face showed a rapid change of expression: fear, rapture, anger, surprise. The expressions were so pronounced, so distorted, that at times Henry Erdmann almost looked like someone else. Jake wondered wildly if he should record this on his cell camera, but he didn't move. Carrie knelt beside the sofa and put both arms around the old man, as if to hold him here with her.

"We . . . can't help it," Henry got out. "If one person thinks strongly enough about—ah, God!"

The lights and TV went off. Alarms sounded, followed by sirens. Then a thin beam of light shone on Henry's face; Geraci had a pocket flashlight. Henry's entire body convulsed in seizure, but he opened his eyes. DiBella could barely hear his whispered words.

"It's a choice."

*The only way was a choice. The ship didn't understand the necessity—how could any single unit choose other than to become part of its whole? That had never happened before. Birthing entities came happily to join themselves. The direction of evolution was toward greater complexity, always. But choice must be the last possible action here, for this misbegotten and unguided being. If it did **not** choose to merge—*

*Destruction. To preserve the essence of consciousness itself, which meant the essence of all.*

## FOURTEEN

**E**velyn, who feared hospitals, had refused to go to Redborn Memorial to be "checked over" after the afternoon's fainting spell. That's all it was, just fainting, nothing to get your blood in a boil about, just a—

She stopped halfway between her microwave and kitchen table. The casserole in her hand fell to the floor and shattered.

The light was back, the one she'd dreamed about in her faint. Only it wasn't a light and this wasn't a dream. It was there in her mind, and it was her mind, and she was it . . . had always been it. How could that be? But the presence filled her and Evelyn knew, beyond any doubt, that if she joined it, she would never, ever be alone again. Why, she didn't need words, had never needed words, all she had to do was choose to go where she belonged anyway . . .



Who knew?

Happily, the former Evelyn Krenchnoted became part of those waiting for her, even as her body dropped to the linguini-spattered floor.

In a shack in the slums of Karachi, a man lay on a pile of clean rags. His toothless gums worked up and down, but he made no sound. All night he had been waiting alone to die, but now it seemed his wait had truly been for something else, something larger than even death, and very old.

Old. It sought the old, and only the old, and the toothless man knew why. Only the old had earned this, had paid for this in the only coin that really mattered: the accumulation of sufficient sorrow.

With relief he slipped away from his pain-wracked body and into the ancient largeness.

*No. He wasn't moving*, Bob thought. The presence in his mind terrified him, and terror turned him furious. Let them—whoever—try all their cheap tricks, they were as bad as union negotiators. Offering concessions that would never materialize. Trying to fool him. He wasn't going anywhere, wasn't becoming anything, not until he knew exactly what the deal was, what the bastards wanted.

They weren't going to get him.

But then he felt something else happen. He knew what it was. Sitting in the Redborn Memorial ER, Bob Donovan cried out, "No! Anna—you can't!" even as his mind tightened and resisted until, abruptly, the presence withdrew and he was alone.

In a luxurious townhouse in San José, a man sat up abruptly in bed. For a long moment he sat completely still in the dark, not even noticing that the clock and digital-cable-box lights were out. He was too filled with wonder.

Of course—why hadn't he seen this before? He, who had spent long joyful nights debugging computers when they still used vacuum tubes—how could he have missed this? He wasn't the whole program, but rather just one line of code! And it was when you put all the code together, not before, that the program could actually run. He'd been only a fragment, and now the whole was here. . . .

He joined it.

Erin Bass experienced *satori*.

Tears filled her eyes. All her adult life she had wanted this, longed for it, practiced meditation for hours each day, and had not even come close to the mystical intoxication she felt now. She hadn't known, hadn't dreamed it could be this oneness with all reality. All her previous striving had been wrong. There was no striving, there was no Erin. She had never been created; she was the creation and the cosmos; no individual existed. Her existence was not her own, and when that last illusion vanished so did she, into the all.

Gina Martinelli felt it, the grace that was the glory of God. Only . . . only



where was Jesus Christ, the savior and Lord? She couldn't feel him, couldn't find Him in the oneness . . .

If Christ was not there, then this wasn't Heaven. It was a trick of the Cunning One, of Satan who knows a million disguises and sends his demons to mislead the faithful. She wasn't going to be tricked!

She folded her arms and began to pray aloud. Gina Martinelli was a faithful Christian. She wasn't going anywhere; she was staying right here, waiting for the one true God.

A tiny woman in Shanghai sat at her window, watching her great-grandchildren children play in the courtyard. How fast they were! Ai, once she had been so fast.

She felt it come over her all at once, the gods entering her soul. So it was her time! Almost she felt young again, felt strong . . . that was good. But even if had not been good, when the gods came for you, you went.

One last look at the children, and she was taken to the gods.

Anna Chernov, wide awake in the St. Sebastian's infirmary that had become her prison, gave a small gasp. She felt power flow through her, and for a wild moment she thought it was the same force that had powered a lifetime of arabesques and jetés, a lifetime ago.

It was not.

This was something outside of herself, separate . . . but it didn't have to be. She could take it in herself, become it, even as it became her. But she held back.

*Will there be dancing?*

No. Not as she knew it, not the glorious stretch of muscle and thrust of limb and arch of back. Not the creation of beauty through the physical body. No. No dancing.

But there was power here, and she could use that power for another kind of escape, from her useless body and this infirmary and a life without dance. From somewhere distant she heard someone cry, "Anna—you can't!" But she could. Anna seized the power, both refusing to join it or to leave it, and bent it onto herself. She was dead before her next breath.

Henry's whole body shuddered. It was here. It was him.

Or not. "It's a choice," he whispered.

On the one hand, everything. All consciousness, woven into the very fabric of space-time itself, just as Wheeler and the rest had glimpsed nearly a hundred years ago. Consciousness at the quantum level, the probability-wave level, the co-evolvee with the universe itself.

On the other hand, the individual Henry Martin Erdmann. If he merged with the uber-consciousness, he would cease to exist as himself, his separate mind. And his mind was everything to Henry.

He hung suspended for nanoseconds, years, eons. Time itself took on a different character. Half here, half not, Henry knew the power, and what it was, and what humanity was not. He saw the outcome. He had his answer.

"No," he said.

Then he lay again on his sofa with Carrie's arms around him, the other two men illuminated dimly by a thin beam of yellow light, and he was once more mortal and alone.

And himself.

*Enough merged. The danger is past. The being is born, and is the ship, and is enough.*

## FIFTEEN

**M**onths to identify all the dead. Years to fully repair all the damage to the world's infrastructure: bridges, buildings, information systems. Decades yet to come, DiBella knew, of speculation about what had actually happened. Not that there weren't theories already. Massive EMP, solar radiation, extrasolar radiation, extrastellar radiation, extraterrestrial attack, global terrorism, Armageddon, tectonic plate activity, genetically engineered viruses. Stupid ideas, all easily disproved, but of course that stopped no one from believing them. The few old people left said almost nothing. Those that did, were scarcely believed.

Jake scarcely believed it himself.

He did nothing with the brain scans of Evelyn Krenchnoted and the three others, because there was nothing plausible he could do. They were all dead, anyway. "Only their bodies," Carrie always added. She believed everything Henry Erdmann told her.

Did DiBella believe Henry's ideas? On Tuesdays he did, on Wednesdays not, on Thursdays belief again. There was no replicable proof. It wasn't science. It was . . . something else.

DiBella lived his life. He broke up with James. He visited Henry, long after the study of senior attention patterns was over. He went to dinner with Carrie and Vince Geraci. He was best man at their wedding.

He attended his mother's sixty-fifth birthday party, a lavish shindig organized by his sister in the ballroom of a glitzy downtown hotel. The birthday girl laughed, and kissed the relatives who'd flown in from Chicago, and opened her gifts. As she gyrated on the dance floor with his Uncle Sam, DiBella wondered if she would live long enough to reach eighty.

Wondered how many others in the world would reach eighty.

"It was only because enough of them chose to go that the rest of us lost the emerging power," Henry had said, and DiBella noted that *them* instead of *us*. "If you have only a few atoms of uranium left, you can't reach critical mass."

DiBella would have put it differently: If you have only a few neurons, you don't have a conscious brain. But it came to the same thing in the end.

"If so many hadn't merged, then the consciousness would have had to . . ." Henry didn't finish his sentence, then or ever. But DiBella could guess.

"Come on, boy," Uncle Sam called, "get yourself a partner and dance!"

DiBella shook his head and smiled. He didn't have a partner just now and he didn't want to dance. All the same, old Sam was right. Dancing had a limited shelf life. The sell-by date was already stamped on most human activity. Someday his mother's generation, the largest demographic bulge in history, would turn eighty. And Henry's choice would have to be made yet again.

How would it go next time? ○

# LISTENING FOR SUBMARINES

Peter Higgins

Peter Higgins lives in Wales. His work can be found in *Zahir*, *Revelation*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Fantasy: The Best of the Year 2007*, and *Best New Fantasy 2*. Of his first tale for *Asimov's* he says, "very little of this story is made up. I was trying to capture the particular atmosphere of a time and place when it seemed to many people that the world really might end, at any moment. A facility like the one described in this tale did operate for twenty-one years on one of the most ancient, strange, and beautiful stretches of the Welsh coast. Google IUSSCAA—listen to the sound, see the photos."

Lieutenant Christopher Osgerby RN lay in the dark. Listening. The wall between his bedroom and Sara's was flimsy plasterboard. He pulled the bed covers closer and turned over, pressing his face to the wallpaper, tucking his knees up against his stomach, longing for sleep, longing not to hear. Listening.

He had never seen the man, who came to Sara only at night. Every night. Christopher hated the sound of that man's voice: his earnest monotone, too muffled to make out words, flowing relentlessly, long waves grating up and down a beach. It didn't sound like English. Sara said little, using the same alien, submarine language. They never laughed. He could hear every sound they made. Now they were starting to . . .

*Shit.*

Christopher sat up suddenly in his bed, sending the guitar crashing to the floor. (An Eccleshall Junior Long Player, mahogany neck and body, rosewood fingerboard, Gotoh machine heads and Double Eagle pickups. Paid for with his first month's Navy pay. Never played since he moved into the cottage.) They must have heard that. He listened in the dark. Nothing changed. They were still . . .

*Shit.*

He felt his way across the room, eased back the curtains and opened the window, letting in the cold November air and the quiet smells of the sea. Uncountable stars hung almost within reach like swollen shining fruit. Somewhere across the fields a fox screamed, once.

There was a record on the turntable. He jammed the fat headphones over his ears, set the needle carefully at the beginning, turned the volume high and huddled under a blanket in the grossly overstuffed chair of red leatherette. Side two was one long slowly building track. It opened with echoing sonar pings. The cover showed a human ear, underwater, listening.

Waking next morning too late to walk the road way round, Christopher took the cross-country path to the base. A misting drizzle plastered his trousers against his legs. In the watch room at 8:30 AM he found Stone already there, leaning back ostentatiously in his chair. Stone watched him trying to remove the mud from his boots and polish them with a handkerchief. "You could live on base," he said. "With the rest of the guys."

Stone was new. He was hard, shiny and ambitious. He didn't shave, he polished his face with pumice twice a day. NAVFAC Maerdy, although located on the wilder shores of West Wales, was a US facility. As Stone was the only other Royal Navy officer attached to Analysis, he and Christopher were expected to work together and share a carrel. On his first day, Stone had fixed an IUSS decal over the desk: *In God We Trust, All Others We Track*.

Christopher flicked the switch that flooded the watch room with sound feed from the arrays.

"Turn it off," groaned Stone. "It hurts."

Christopher shrugged and cut the speakers, but re-routed the feed to the headphone socket on his desk. Yawning, pretending to study the print-outs, he let the sound of the deep oceans wash into his head.

There was no need to listen to live feed. The other analysts never did: all the data you needed was there in the print-outs. Christopher listened because he loved it. It was his passion and his addiction. The most important thing in his life.

NAVFAC Maerdy was a Sound Surveillance monitoring station. She and her North Atlantic sister stations—Keflavik, Antigua, Puerto Rico, Barbados, Newfoundland, Grand Turks—listened for Soviet submarines. Grey steel machines in windowless rooms were connected, via hundreds of miles of cable laid across the ocean floor, to arrays of hydrophones on the edge of the continental shelf. In the watch rooms, automatic pens filled the air with the smell of ozone and the sound of scratching, inscribing endless wavering lines on scrolling paper. Maerdy focused on the Greenland-Iceland-UK Gap, the Soviet navy's narrow exit out of the Barents Sea into the world's open oceans. When armageddon from underwater came, that was the route it must take.

Christopher imagined with obscure pleasure the places where the hydrophones lay. He loved to think of the huge weight of water pressing down on those cold, shelterless depths, and he wanted to be there, floating in the dark, far below the thin surface of the oceans, down where sunlight had never reached since the creation of seas. Sea water is four times

more efficient than air at carrying sound, but it soaks up light, the longer wavelengths first. As you descend beneath the sunlit surface, the water turns green, then twilight blue, then a thick, inky indigo, and finally black. A hundred meters down you come to the lower border of the euphotic zone. Below that, plants and algae cannot survive. Maerdy's hydrophones lie deeper, between 200 and 300 meters, in total darkness, on the brink of cliffs that plunge kilometers, down into the vast, unreachable, alien, further, waiting dark.

Christopher shut his eyes and listened to the slow, patient whispers on the water.

Stone pulled the headphones abruptly away from his ears.

"Come on, Osgerby," he said. "Briefing Room."

"What?"

"9:00 AM. Pirrett. Don't you read the dailies?"

The briefing room was bright, warm, airless and over-filled with people. Captain Howard Pirrett was sitting at a table on a slightly raised platform. The window behind him showed empty, dark November sky. Gusts of wind threw rain like handfuls of gravel against the glass. One of Pirrett's aides put an acetate on the overhead projector.

#### **ABLE ARCHER 83**

"Gentlemen," said Captain Pirrett. "And ladies."

Pirrett's crisp white shirt had short sleeves to show his tanned, muscular forearms. He would have worn exactly the same shirt on the bridge of a cruiser in the Caribbean or behind the desk he had left behind (temporarily) in Pearl Harbor. He waited until he had the attention of the whole room before he began to speak.

"Operation Able Archer 1983," he said at last, "will be unlike any NATO exercise you may have experienced. There are two new elements. First, high level involvement. Prime Minister Thatcher and Chancellor Schmidt will be taking part. So will Secretary MacFarlane. President Reagan himself will be, ah-ha, playing a cameo."

A naval ensign next to Christopher sniggered.

"Second," said Pirrett. "The full-scale simulated release of thermonuclear weapons. We are going to DEFCON 1."

"Sir?" said someone from near the front. "Have the Soviets been informed?"

A ripple of laughter passed across the room.

"To what end, Mister Otis?"

"Serious point, sir. Soviet planning assumes the West would disguise a real attack as border exercises. This could panic them into a pre-emptive strike."

"That is the intention." Pirrett paused for effect. "It's quite a remarkable conception. Soviet analysts will fear it may be the real thing. Our mission is to observe Soviet countermeasures: see how the enemy responds, identify his weaknesses."

"Holy shit," said someone. "That's *suicide*."

"Not our problem," said Pirrett with a smile. "We have our mission. Execute with excellence."

\* \* \*

Christopher was eating his dinner at the kitchen table when Sara came in that night. It was after nine, and she was soaked to the skin.

"Hi," she said, and took off her dripping fur coat and hung it from the back of the kitchen door. Her long black hair clung to her back, flat and dripping, streaked with purple and blue. She put her wet towel on the table next to his dinner, then picked it up again straight away. "Sorry," she said. "Don't mind me." She turned toward the sink and began to rub her hair with the already-dripping towel.

He watched her carefully. He always did, when he got the chance. She was tall, perhaps taller than him. Her hips and shoulders were narrow. Damp and shivering as she was, she looked thin beneath her long black skirt. She lifted her hair, wrapped in another towel, and piled it on top of her head, revealing the nape of her neck. It was slender and vulnerable, at odds with the purple-painted nails, the streaks in her hair, the black eyeliner. Once he had seen her blurred naked outline through the rippled glass of the bathroom door, bending over the basin. It was like seeing her through water.

"How's the spook's nest?" said her muffled voice from under the towel.

"Oh, you know, quiet. You haven't been out swimming now? Not in this weather?"

"Absolutely." She turned round and gave him a grin. "Every day. Never miss. Tonight was fantastic. The tide was way up and the swell was massive. Amazing."

Sara had deep brown eyes, the irises so large they showed almost no white at all. Now, fresh from her swimming, her eyes were bright and shining wet, her pupils darkly dilated. Sometimes Christopher wondered whether she took drugs. She was shivering. "It is bloody cold, though," she said. "You should try it sometime."

"I was going to make tea," he said. "Want some?"

"Mm," she said. "Please." She sat at the table and lit a cigarette while he made the tea, and they talked about the weather. He hoped she'd stay and drink it with him, but she didn't. "Thanks," she said, and took it up to her room and closed the door.

Sara was already living in the cottage when Christopher took the room. He hadn't realized the only other tenant was a woman. Somehow he'd assumed it would be another serviceman from the base. She didn't talk to him much. He thought it might be the uniform, though he always took it off as soon as he got in. Sometimes she left Greenham Common leaflets lying around. He wanted to let her know he was different: he made cynical comments about Mrs. Thatcher, and left carefully selected albums—The Cure, The Smiths, The Fall—where she would see them. He wanted Sara to like him, and he wanted to know more about her. She didn't seem to go to work. As far as he could tell from the overflowing plates and saucers she used as ashtrays, she hung around the house, smoking. He did know that every day she took the narrow path along the cliff edge and down to the bay, where she swam. And every night the man he never saw came to the cottage and she took him up to her room. Christopher wondered if he was there during the day, too.



That night he was lying on his bed, trying to read but thinking of Soviet submarines in the Arctic seas, burrowing forward under the weight of dark waters, bearing their loads of death. He heard Sara go downstairs and open the door. He heard them go into her room. He listened for the sounds to begin.

Christopher's next few days were spent almost entirely in the watch room. Listening. Watching the scratchy pen-trails on the unrolling paper. They were on long shifts, instructed to sleep on the base.

There were celebrations when the first traces were triangulated: a US Navy convoy – an aircraft carrier and two cruisers—was steaming northeast of the Reykjanes Ridge on a course that would take them between Iceland and the Faeroes, breaching the GIUK Gap; and to the north of them, deep in the Norwegian Sea, three Soviet submarines were on a convergent southward course. The early elation of discovery soon evaporated, replaced by a subdued nervousness in the watch room as the analysts watched the game play itself out.

A Soviet Delta-1 class submarine, 139 meters long, propelled by two VM4 pressurized-water nuclear reactors, operates comfortably at depths of up to four hundred meters and carries twelve "Stingray" thermonuclear ballistic missiles. Its hydrophone signature is an unmistakable rhythmic knocking rumble. That is what the approach of armageddon sounds like.

Every hour brought the US convoy and the Soviet submarines closer together.

"Reagan terrifies the Soviets," someone said. "They think he's a religious nut. They think he wants to open the Seventh Seal."

"How would you know?" said Stone. He was as alert and groomed as ever.

"I've got friends studying in Moscow. They know people there."

"You report those contacts?"

"Lighten up, Stone."

"Shut up!" called Christopher. "Quiet! Let me listen! I've got something else."

There was . . . something else. There was the drumming of the Delta-1's and . . . something else. A voice. Not a whale's voice (he heard them calling sometimes, out in the lonely ocean) but something larger than a whale, sadder, more intelligent, more beautiful. It was imitating the submarines. Another voice joined it. Harmonizing. Both voices were harmonizing with the submarines' monotones, weaving them into complex, beautiful song.

"Listen!" Christopher was shouting. "For god's sake. Shut up and listen." He flipped the feed to the speakers and adjusted the filters to take out the background noise, until the long, beautiful song filled the watch room.

"It's a wind-up," said Stone. "You made this yourself. It's a tape."

"No," said Christopher. "It's not."

It was impossible to pick out the song on the gram paper. Too much background. No trace there. And then, abruptly, it faded, and on the speakers there was only the lonely, ominous tone of the Soviet turbines.

That evening NATO readiness was raised to DEFCON 2 for the first



time since Cuba, 1961. The Western military world was just one ratchet below nuclear war. But there was no preventing the British contingent celebrating Bonfire Night, and the US personnel seized on the distraction. Christopher found himself sitting in a corner, full of beer, the jukebox hammering at his head. Bonnie Tyler. Irene Cara. Billy Joel's "Uptown Girl." Yes, "Owner of a Lonely Heart." When Kiss came on, "Lick It Up," the bar staff turned the volume up and the bar filled with whooping and cheering. The TV was showing *First Blood* on video without the sound.

Christopher was telling some guy he had a guitar at home, he wanted to be a musician, not this kind of crap, The Smiths, for instance. Then he said he had to go to the bathroom. As he left the table, he heard them talking about him. "Osgerby, yeah. Nice enough guy, maybe, but . . ."

AC/DC, "Guns For Hire" was thumping up the corridor. There was a smell of stale bodies, cigarettes and beer. He turned away from the bathroom and headed for the quiet of the deserted watch room. Ozone was heavy in the air, the ranks of gram-writers were scratching relentlessly at their rolls of paper. He put the headphones on, just to rest in the sounds of the cold mid-ocean darkness.

And the beautiful voices were there again. Long and slow, they were calling to each other, and to him. The submarines were still in the song, but it was more complex now, fragmented and recombined, repeated faster and slower. And more voices. Sometimes they broke off in a kind of repetitious bellowing. Slower phrases sank through the octaves until they dropped out of his hearing altogether. Then came shrill, intermittent pulses, hard and fast little tumbling balls of sound, like bird song. Each voice had a different way of putting sounds together, each one a clear and distinctive personality, though he could not have described their characteristics in human terms. He almost jumped out of his seat when one came right up close to a hydrophone and shrieked into it, angrily.

For an hour he simply listened. Then, sleepwalking, he plugged in a tape recorder and set it running.

He stayed all night listening, and at the end of the next day's shift he took the first big risk in his life. Never before had he knowingly broken the rules, the big ones, the ones that matter. Never before had he done anything which put him beyond the approval of the authorities. But now he picked up the cassettes of tape and slipped them into his pocket.

When he crossed the perimeter his heart was pumping so hard he could not have spoken, not a word, if they had challenged him. He felt so sick he thought he would just vomit on the spot. But he wasn't stopped. Nobody gave him a second glance. They all knew Osgerby, a nice enough guy, but . . .

Outside it was late on Monday afternoon. Thin drifts of mist and drizzle swept across the moorland under a dim grey sky. He was trembling. His legs were so weak he could hardly keep walking.

The anxiety on the base—the strain of days watching the traces as the Soviet submarines moved south through icy waters and the US convoy steamed further into the GIUK Gap—had grown so strong you could feel it and smell it. His clothes and his hair, even his skin, were saturated with the sour smell of the watch room. He smelled of fear. And now . . .

what had he done? He felt the tapes in his pocket. If he were caught, if they knew . . .

When he reached the cliff-edge path which led to the cottage, he needed to rest. Leaning against a stile, he looked out across the mist-shrouded bay. For a moment the grey veils drifted apart and he saw the low, dark shape of an island, about half a mile out. There should have been no island there. There should have been nothing but the grey body of the sea. But there was no doubting it: he could see an island, a black mass of rock rising to a slight prominence at the northern end. It must have been a mile long. He could make out trees. A low crest of woodland edging the spine of it. Then the mist closed in again and the island disappeared.

Though he stood and waited until he was cold right through and soaking wet, the mist didn't clear again. When the wind picked up and the rain grew heavier he turned away.

There was a mess of wet sand and seaweed on the doorstep, and the air inside the cottage was damp and chill and heavy with the smell of the sea, like a cave on the beach. It felt as if the tide had just withdrawn. Sara was not at home and her fur coat was not in its place behind the door. She had left one of her heaps of stuff from the seashore strewn across the table: seashells, pebbles, pieces of driftwood, seaweed holdfasts, dried urchin cases, mermaid's purses. There was stuff like that all over the cottage. Christopher climbed up to his room, put the first of the cassettes in the tape deck, and fell, exhausted, onto the bed.

He was aching with tiredness and tension. As the room filled with the slow, aching voices of the sea, he drifted in a kind of befuddled wakefulness. The long voices on the tape were calling to him. He felt as if he were floating deep under the sea himself. His body became larger. He was vast. He no longer had rigid limbs and a heavy skeleton, he was a huge floating agglomeration with no clear edge of definition. He felt like nothing so much as an enormously, hugely, stupendously vast egg, without a shell, floating in the heavy cold darkness. He stretched for miles. He was held together by the viscosity of himself, denser and more coherent at the center but spreading outward in all directions, a vast shapeless umbra of consciousness that became more dispersed and permeable as it mingled indefinitely with the sea at the borders between him and not-him.

It was wonderful.

He was weightless and timeless, a darkly luminous awareness, an all-encompassing intelligence. He enjoyed the thoughts and feelings that passed through him. He savored them. He lingered patiently over every insight and sensation, tasting the currents of the ocean as he slowly, languorously turned and stretched like a comfortable cat.

There was a tentative knock at his bedroom door. He jumped up in a guilty panic and slammed off the tape player. It was Sara.

"Oh," he said. "Hi."

"Can I come in?"

"What? Oh, sure. I guess."

Evening had come. He'd been lying in his room in near-darkness.

"It's a bit of a mess in here . . ." he said. He couldn't think straight. He stood in the doorway, hesitating, blocking her way.

"I was listening," she said. "To those . . . sounds . . ."

"Oh . . ."

"I didn't think anyone else round here could hear them. I thought I was the only one."

"You've *heard* that? *Before*? How could. . .?"

"Can I come in? I mean, just for a minute?"

"Well, I guess so."

"I don't want to disturb you. I mean, I'm sorry, I couldn't help but hear, you had it on very loud. . ."

"The thing is," he said. "I don't know what it is. I wish I did, but I don't. How could you . . . I mean, do *you*. . .?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Possibly. I'm not sure. Look, I'm sorry to disturb you. Another time."

"No, wait. Come in." He stood aside, and turned on the desk lamp. "Please."

Afterward, Christopher found that he couldn't remember the detail of what they actually said that evening. Above all, what he did remember was Sara sitting in the fat red leatherette chair, and him on the bed. Her black, purple-streaked hair, still wet from swimming in the sea, held back from her face with a black band. She was wearing a grey cardigan with holes in the sleeves, a long black skirt, scruffy flat shoes that left the tops of her pale feet bare. The slender bone structure moved visibly when she flexed her toes.

She smoked as they talked. Somehow, she ended up asking him about himself, and somehow, because he was overstretched and bewildered and she was listening to him, he told her. It came out all mixed up: how he'd wanted to be a musician but his parents wanted a proper career for him. The Navy had paid for him to study electronics. "The money was good," he said. "I never really thought what would happen afterward. And now here I am." He told her about listening for submarines, hearing the beautiful songs of the sea, making the tapes. Stealing them. "God knows what made me. If they find out . . . Christ, it's *spying* . . . it's probably *treason* . . ."

"But they don't know, do they?" she said. "And they can't find out."

"I could take them back. Or burn them."

"No," she said. "Don't do that."

"What is it, anyway? It's got to be organic. Like whale song. Only we get whales all the time. They sound nothing like that. You said you'd heard it before?"

"Well, I thought so. Maybe . . ."

"When? When could you have?"

"Oh," she looked surprised. "Swimming. Out in the bay. When I go deep, sometimes I . . . but I really don't know. I shouldn't have said anything. I'd need to hear it more. I was only listening from downstairs."

He stood up. "I'll put it on now."

"Not now," she said. "I have to go."

She stood up. Without either of them intending it, they found themselves close together. They both hesitated. Christopher found he was looking into her face intently, examining her. He knew the expression on his own face was wide open. Unprotected. Obvious, like he never let it be, the

need and wanting plain and raw. Scarcely knowing what he was doing, he took hold of her arm gently.

"Sara. I . . ."

She withdrew her arm from his grip.

"I'd better go," she said.

The smell of her cigarettes lingered in the room. Later, the man came to the house again. Christopher played the "Blue Monday" twelve-inch. Over and over again.

When he finally slept he dreamed of sleek, coiling monsters.

The next morning the rain had lifted, but though he stood for fifteen minutes on the cliff top to scan the dull grey water under a watery sky, there was no island out there.

As he got near the base, the fear reached inside his chest and began to squeeze. By the time he reached the gates he was water inside. Knowing the guards would arrest him. But they nodded him through.

No one looked up when he entered the watch room, but the usual trays were empty.

"Hey," he said to Stone, trying to make it casual. "Where are the scrolls from yesterday?"

"What? Oh, yeah. Special analysis. Somebody making a cross-check with Reykjavik or something."

"All of them?"

"Guess so."

"Who does a reconciliation in the middle of an exercise?"

Stone shrugged. "What's it matter? Some hush-hush thing. You know," he tapped the side of his nose. "Sneaky beaky. Ask no questions."

"Don't patronize me, Stone. I'm senior officer on this watch and I should know what's happening."

"Sure. Whatever you say, Lieutenant. Why don't you go ask Pirrett about it?"

Christopher buried his head in his work. He kept the headphones on as much as he could but there was nothing to hear. As the day wore on he found it harder and harder to concentrate. He wanted to hear again the long songs of the sea. He wanted to go back to the cottage and play the tapes. Sara would be there now. Alone. Probably.

By lunchtime, crisis gripped NAVFAC Maerdy. The Delta-1's were hanging motionless in mid-ocean. NATO was at DEFCON 1. Nobody at Maerdy was quite sure whether Able Archer 83 was still an exercise or not. Lieutenant Christopher Osgerby quietly put down his pen, put on his coat and walked off the base.

Sara's fur coat was in its place at the back of the kitchen door. He felt it with his hand, and buried his face in it briefly. It was slightly damp and smelled of the beach.

He stood outside the door of her room, listening. There was nothing. If she was there, she was surely on her own. Unless they were sleeping. Christopher knocked. He'd never done that before. He'd never seen inside her room.

The door opened.

"Oh," she said. She looked . . . puzzled. "I thought you were at work. Is everything okay?"

He held out the tape cassettes. "I brought you these. You said yesterday you wanted to hear them properly. Can you play them all right? I mean . . . I don't know if you've got a tape player?"

"I'm fine. Thanks. I'll listen to them."

She was going to close the door.

"Sara?" he said. "Um. Yesterday . . ."

"Christopher, I'm really, really sorry. I was so rude. I'm really . . . to just go off like that . . . I should have . . ."

"No," he said. "It's okay. Please."

"I didn't think . . ." she said. Her whiteless brown eyes seemed to be searching for something in his face. It was an odd, alien look that he couldn't interpret. The skin of her face looked cool and pale. It shone faintly in the half-light on the landing as if it was slightly damp.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Really. Listen, I was just thinking, seeing as we live out here together, it might be nice if . . . well, we could go out. One evening. Maybe. For a drink or something?"

"Chris, you know I'm . . . seeing someone. Don't you?"

He felt his face coloring. "Well, I thought . . . anyway, let me know what you think of the tape." He turned to go.

"Wait," she said. "Look . . . I wasn't going to . . ." She was struggling with something. He couldn't tell what it was, but she seemed to make up her mind. She held open the door to her room. "Come in a moment."

The curtains were drawn and her room was cool in the afternoon half-light filtered through thin, pale-green fabric. There was almost no furniture. Sara sat on the floor, and he did the same, trying to stop himself peering about, but only ending up feeling furtive. As his eyes adapted to the dim light he saw heaps of the beach stuff she had collected. It was piled up on the windowsill and scattered across the uncarpeted floorboards. The faint smell of the sea was on the air again. It tinged his awareness of Sara herself: her cool, thin body under her black clothes, and behind her shoulder the distracting, shadowy bulk of her bed.

"There's something I should have said yesterday," she said. "But I didn't. I wasn't sure I could. Actually, I'm still not sure I can . . ."

Christopher was struggling to keep his attention focused. "You can say what you want to me," he said.

"It's about the tapes."

"Oh."

"You mustn't listen to them. They're dangerous. I mean, what you can hear on them is dangerous, and you mustn't listen to it again, not ever."

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"What?"

He couldn't see much of her face, only a soft silhouette. *What was she trying to say?*

"Destroy the tapes. Don't listen again."

No, she couldn't mean that. The long song of the sea was wonderful. It was *essential*.

"You know what that sound is," he said. "Don't you? You have to tell me, Sara."

"I can't. But I know you have to stop listening."

"But . . . it's beautiful, and I found it. I taped it. It's my discovery, I can't just chuck it away. It's more important than that. What do you *know*?"

"Listening to it gives you dreams, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"And you want to listen to it, more than you want to do anything else in the world?"

He was watching the pale glimmer of her skin in the shadows, the darkness of her hair, the darkness of her mouth, the purple of her fingernails. "Not more than *anything* . . ." he said, "but, basically, yes."

Sara took a breath.

"There's no name for them," she said. "Not any more. Most people can't hear them. If you can, it's a gift, but dangerous, like an addiction. Hearing their song soaks away your energies. All you want to do is listen more and more. It gets into your blood, it takes you over, it calls you: and in the end it pulls you down, deep into the water, and you drown. That's why when you hear it you have to turn away fast, and come out of the sea."

"So we both have this gift?" he said. "But I've only heard it on the hydrophones: maybe that's not the same."

"You mustn't listen, Christopher. You mustn't go looking for them."

"What I'm hearing is way out in the Atlantic. Are you saying they come inshore too? Here?"

"Maybe. I think so. They're everywhere."

"What are they? Some kind of whale or something?"

She shook her head and looked away toward the curtained window, as if she were looking toward the sea. She sat that way in silence for a moment.

"I'm not supposed to say," she said, carefully, in a low, quiet voice.

"Sara. . . ?"

She held out her hands toward him in the dim greenish light, palms upward and fingers spread wide. He saw that her fingers—but not her thumb—were joined below the first joint by thin and delicately translucent folds of skin.

His heart was tight in his chest. It was hard to breathe. He wanted to put his arms around her narrow shoulders. He wanted those pale slender hands to touch his skin. Her whiteless brown eyes glistened.

"You'd better go," she said.

He looked around her sparse room heaped with things from the sea. "What's happening to you?" he said.

"I'm diving deep. You can't get involved."

"That guy who comes here in the night. He's part of it, isn't he? Who is he?"



She flinched. Closing herself against him.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Leave me alone. I know what I'm doing and it's nothing to do with you. He was right. I shouldn't have talked to you. Please go now."

That night, Christopher heard him come to her again. Their voices were raised, arguing, but he couldn't make out words. Later, he heard Sara cry out. It might have been pain, but it wasn't.

He woke before dawn from dreams of the sea. Someone was moving around in Sara's room. He heard scuffling, the scraping of wood on wood, her heaps of shoreline stuff being shoved aside. Through the wall came a man's grunt and a muffled curse, as if he had stumbled in the dark. Then her bedroom door opened and heavy footsteps went down the stairs.

Christopher pulled on his trousers and searched around for his socks, but couldn't find them. He pulled his shoes on anyway and went downstairs. If he could surprise the man before he left, if he found them both together in the kitchen, he would . . . what? There was no time to think.

In the kitchen it was Stone. He was standing by the kitchen table, holding the tape cassettes in the air like a trophy.

"Stone, what the hell are you doing here? Get out of my kitchen. Get out of my house."

"Why don't you just sit down, Lieutenant. Collect your thoughts." Stone started opening cupboards at random. "Where the hell do you keep your coffee? I need a cup. This is too early for me."

"Just get out," said Christopher. "How did you get in here anyway? Where's Sara?" He looked over Stone's shoulder. The kitchen door was unbolted and standing open, Sara's fur coat gone from its place. If she had heard Stone coming and run. . . ? She needed time. He would give it to her if he could. He sat down heavily at the table. "There's tea," he said. "Over there."

"Thanks," said Stone. He began to busy himself with filling the kettle. "Mugs?"

"What are you doing in my house, Stone?"

"You're in deep shit, Osgerby. You could disappear for a long time because of these." He brandished the cassettes again.

Christopher sat in silence. What was there to say? Nothing. He had no energy left, not even anger. He let time drift on while Stone made tea.

Stone set a mug in front of each of them and sat down facing him across the table. They looked at each other in silence. Suddenly Stone stood up again. "Where's your bin?" he said.

"What? There, but . . ."

Stone went over, stepped on the lever to open the pedal bin, dropped the tapes in, let the lid fall shut with a small thud, and sat back down in his chair.

"There," he said. "Over. Forgotten. Never happened." Christopher stared at him. "You've got a talent, Lieutenant. Pity to waste it."

"What are you talking about? Who are you, anyway?"

"Never mind that. I'm authorized to make you an offer."

"You're Security, aren't you? SIS? Box? You never did know your arse from your elbow reading the feed."

"And you like to listen, don't you, Chris? Just . . . listen? That's what you do best, isn't it? And you hear things no one else can hear. We've looked at the scrolls from the last few days over and over again, but we just can't find what you picked up on those tapes. It's in there somewhere, bound to be, but we can't pick it out of the background noise. Maybe we never will, not without a human ear to sniff it first. Like you can. There's a couple of others can do it too. The CIA's got them tucked away safe at Langley. But we need more talent. One at every SOSUS base. So that's the offer. Just carry on listening, and tell me—only me—what you hear. We'll do the rest, and forget this tape business. You'll be listening for Queen and Country. And furthering your career."

"You knew about those . . . traces . . . already?"

"Oh sure. We've got a good idea what's making them, too. We're trying to figure out how to make them respond when we want them to, so we can track them. That's what this exercise has all been about, as far as Maerdy's concerned."

"The target wasn't the Soviets. Was it?"

"We're looking for things in the water, Chris. The Soviets don't matter any more. They're history. Ideology's history. Money is freedom and Reagan's pockets are bottomless. The Soviets are busted and the clever ones know it. So what comes next? That's the question, and the answer is: the sea. Full fathom five. The sea's the next frontier. Nobody, but *nobody*, cares about space any more. SDI is all my eye and there's shit-all else out there. It's empty. Expensive and empty. But the *sea*, now, the vasty deeps, seven-tenths and all that, who knows *what's* lurking out there? That's where we're going now, and we'll want people like you who have . . . affinities with it."

"And all you want me to do is listen."

"Sure. Just sit comfortably and listen. Oh, and you can tell us all about your pretty girlfriend upstairs too."

"Go to hell, Stone. Or whatever your name is."

Stone shrugged. "Think it over," he said. "For a little while. You don't have many options." He stood up. "My car's outside. Can I give you a lift to the base?"

"Just get out of my house."

Christopher waited until he heard the car drive away down the track, then went out into the chill November dawn. The encounter with Stone had only taken ten minutes. Fifteen maybe. Of course, he didn't know how long Stone had been in the house before he woke up, but maybe there was still time. There was only one way she could have gone: along the cliff path. He followed, running hard, stumbling along the narrow track. As the grey light grew in the sky, the low dark outline of the island was visible out in the bay. He caught sight for a moment of a figure silhouetted some way ahead of him along the path. The figure disappeared, but he knew where she had gone.

The way down to the little bay was steep and difficult in the half-light. There was a fine rain falling that made the stone slippery. He had to

watch where he put his feet and hold knotted roots of gorse for balance. When he reached the beach of sharp jagged rocks and shingle there was no one to be seen. The tide was halfway out. He could hear the waves breaking on the shore. He stumbled forward, calling.

"Sara! Sara!"

As he rounded a high black rock she spoke to him.

"You can't follow me, Chris."

She was standing naked in the rain. She looked thin and cold. The rain had smoothed her black hair over the shape of her head and down her narrow shoulders. A trail of it fell across her face. He saw the fine goosebumps on her arms and the faint blue-pink mottling of the flesh on her legs. Her dark eyes were looking at him with no expression that he could read.

"Go home," she said.

"You're going to the island."

"I have to go now, Chris."

"Because you told me . . . because I know . . . it's my fault, isn't it. . . ?"

"It's what I want."

"But I want it, too. I have the gift, too. The sound of that song, it's inside me now, I can't get rid of it. And I've got nowhere else to go. I can't go back. They want me to . . . at the base, they know what's out there. They'll come looking. Maybe I can help."

"Chris, I'm sorry . . ."

It was the same old story. You see her and you need her, and because you need her, you lose her. That's how it always is, for the men on the shore. She wakes up something inside you that never goes back to sleep. It drives you on for ever. You spend the rest of your life looking for her. But you can never actually have her.

"Chris, I'm not . . . whatever you think I am. You've made a mistake."

She turned away from him and walked out into the purple-grey water. He watched her until the swell rose against her breasts and she leaned forward into it and began to swim. Her sleek dark head turned to look back at him for a moment. He thought he could see her wide, whiteless brown eyes observing him, like seals sometimes did when he walked on the beach. Then the sea closed over her.

Christopher stood, shivering, watching the dull grey swell. It had begun to rain.

There was a thunderous rattling clattering mechanical roar behind him. He ducked instinctively. A Sea King helicopter roared out over the cliff-top, flying low, heading out into the bay. ○

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# PRAYERS FOR AN EGG

Sara Genge

Sara Genge is a Spanish doctor living and working in Madrid. She has sold short stories to *Strange Horizons*, *Helix SF*, *Cosmos Magazine*, *Apex Digest*, *Weird Tales*, and a few others. Sara is a co-founder and regular contributor to *www.dailycabal.com*, a blog of speculative microfiction. She has participated in Villa Diodati 1 and 2—a pan-European spec fiction workshop for writers living outside the States who don't get the chance to go to regular science fiction conventions. In her first story for *Asimov's*, the author sets us down on another planet for a hard look at alien biology and social customs.

**M**aster Gundaro chooses an auspicious time to come claim his bride. The wheat is ripe and mobile, and surges out of the fields and into the garden, poking at the windows, growing through the cracks in the marble portico and even under the stilts that support the house.

Lasa stands behind the intended, Mistress Jandala, on the portico and clutches the egg bead Dia has given her. She closes her hands into fists and hides them in her robes, ignoring the pain from her cracked calluses. The state of her hands shames her, as does the sunburn on the tips of her tentacles, earned by the long hours spent with the other servants attaching pink ribbons to the swaying stalks of wheat. Old Dia says this is what it means to be a good servant: to be forever shamed by your condition, forever proud of your good work.

The wind pulls at each ribbon, lifting the stalks by their bountiful heads for the new Master to see, and Lasa allows herself a smile: she's helped turn the estate into a sea of pink and yellow, and pink and yellow are good colors for a wedding.

And, oh, how beautiful is her lady, Jandala! It makes Lasa proud to look at her Mistress, so refined and perfect, the best example of the High Caste. Jandala's pink mane floats in the air and her tentacles, thin and wispy, surround her head in a delicate corona. Even as she sings, her forked tongues remain close to her face so as not to smell the unpleasant

odors of the low caste servants around her. Droplets of sweat and saliva collect on her tongues. To Lasa, they look like a dozen small pearls shining in the sunlight.

Lasa wants to cry from happiness. She can never be more than a servant, but this woman has chosen her to be her jaja-maid and, for a servant, there can be no greater honor.

When Gundaro jumps out of the carriage, Jandala's shoulders quiver and the sunlight bounces off her nacre skin in subtle iridescence.

Everyone waits while the trunks are opened and the wind-organ is pulled out in clanging pieces and assembled noisily on the front lawn. When the wind starts moaning through it, the household breaks into cheers. Master Gundaro has claimed his wife and his estate. Their life together has begun.

"We are married now," he says, pecking his wife's cheek with a sturdy tentacle.

"The bonding will be at sunset," she replies.

"As you wish," he chuckles, "although why you women put such store in that ceremony is beyond me."

Master and Mistress retreat into the house and Lasa starts preparing for the jaja ceremony. She has already washed and purified herself to meet Master Gundaro, but she still needs to scrape her skin with pumice. Hopefully, pumice stone will also help her calluses.

"Jaja-woman, Mistress Jandala wants you," Master says, standing under the doorway with his tentacles in disarray.

Lasa is embarrassed, although she knows she needn't be. It is appropriate for a jaja-servant to see a Master dishevelled. Gundaro has broken protocol and come to fetch her himself, and she realizes that Master must be eager to impregnate his bride. It is not the first time that he tries to hurry things up: a couple of hours earlier, as Lasa listened behind the door at the ceremony, she heard Gundaro urging the Ceremony Master, muttering that he didn't have time for "prayers and roses."

As he turns to open the door, she notices his clenched buttocks. His musk is strong so she moves quickly, wrapping her tongues closer to her face to avoid his smell. Being on such intimate terms with the Masters makes her uncomfortable, but she steps into the room, fingering Dia's egg bead for luck, anxious to get it over with.

Judging by the way Jandala's smell clings to the dry moss, Lasa guesses Mistress is more than ready. Lasa's stomach tightens as her tongues dance to the taste, and she tiptoes up to the bed and stares at the Mistress, deep in fecundity trance.

She doesn't want to break the spell, so she hesitates for a few seconds before placing her hands on Jandala's body and caressing her skin, which shines like egg-shell in the candlelight.

When Jandala's skin turns pink, Lasa parts her Mistress's nether lips and breaths jaja into her oviduct.

The woman shivers with pleasure and calls out Lasa's name. Jandala's grip on her servant's hair is not the stately pat Lasa is used to. Mistress keens and the windows rattle. For a second Lasa fears that her newly

wed Mistress will be one of those deviants who prefer the breath of a casteless servant to the rhythmic thrusts of her rightful husband, but then Mistress ovulates and it's over. Lasa presses her hand on Mistress's abdomen and helps the gelatinous egg lodge into the oviduct.

Mistress sits up and arranges the quilts around her, covering her glowing skin in silk and dignity. She pats Lasa on the head and orders her to fetch her husband. She is back in control, and her jaja-servant sighs with relief.

Master orders her to leave, but she can tell he does not want her to go. Lasa is painfully aware of the jaja breath still clinging to her. He inhales deeply, as is custom, and hesitates. She can read the contradicting impulses playing out in the knot of his shoulders and the ripple of his neck-flaps. Masters are always torn between temperamental wives and docile servants, but most of them don't feel such lowly impulses on their wedding nights. How sad for Mistress Jandala! It seems forever, but he finally waves her away and she's free to run out of the room.

Getting down the stairs proves to be hard. The aftertaste lingers on her tongues and she trembles as each spasm brings up another wave of jaja breath, which trails behind her in a scented cloud.

She tells herself that she's done what was required. It's not a servant's place to feel shame, but she hides under the staircase anyway, wiping her mouth until she stops convulsing and starts crying, the tears strange on her breath-scented face.

After a while, Old Dia slips into the darkness and places a wrinkled arm around Lasa's shoulders.

"Shh, don't cry, you've done well. The Masters will be pleased with you."

Lasa cries harder.

"It's all right, it's all right. You'll get used to it. First jaja is always the hardest, but it's a great honor."

Lasa whimpers and sinks her face into the wrinkled crevice between the old woman's arm and first tentacle. Dia smells of jimba beans, soap and roast, and the hay filling of the servants' beds. Lasa digs her head further into the smelly pit and feels safe surrounded by Dia's sagging flesh and the soft noises her body makes to keep her alive. She listens to the older woman's heartbeat, the rattle of her lungs and the occasional puff of her neck-flaps as they open to expel gas.

Old Dia is the kitchen boss. She can be hard if you let her down, but she always treats Lasa like she's special. Lasa stops crying.

"Come on into the kitchen," Dia says, "we are going to shell pods. Purple peas make a good breakfast for newlyweds."

The servants gather around a tub brimming with warm water and vines. The pods move against the servants' fingers, trying to escape, twisting and tickling until one by one, the women retrieve them, bite off the stem and release the wriggling peas back into the water. Peas die fast off the vine, but because the servants are devoted and do the shelling at night, Master Gundaro and Mistress Jandala will have live peas for breakfast in the morning.

The women joke about the thumping noises coming from the ceiling. Lasa works at a good pace, but she doesn't talk much. Suddenly, she feels



warm wet peas wriggling down the back of her dress. She squeals and turns around to catch Dia purple-handed. The old woman has a look that says the girl won't dare retaliate. As if! Lasa grabs a handful of husks and smears them on Dia's face.

"See what you've done! How do I explain purple face to Master tomorrow," Dia says, exaggerating her accent because she knows it will make the women laugh and because she won't let them forget that she wasn't born to this house, that she was bought in Quei and that she was originally a free woman. Dia always wears the egg necklace her mother gave her before she was sold. Now it's missing a bead, the one Lasa carries in her pocket. The necklace is a symbol of Dia's power, and the closest thing to a sceptre any servant ever wielded in the kitchens of a house.

"He won't notice," Nin shouts. "I doubt he'll even leave the room."

A husk fight erupts. Beans fly from one corner of the room to the other. Purple stains their faces and clothes, but they're drunk on gossip and jitter. Today is for happiness and washing can wait.

As fast as the fight started, it's over. The servants quiet down and give each other guilty looks. In the garden, the wind-organ moans. The servants heave a collective sigh and get back to work, shelling the peas to the beat of lovemaking from the first floor.

Two weeks later, Mistress Jandala gives Lasa the egg. It wouldn't do for a mistress to become attached to an egg that might grow up to be a servant. Lasa takes it with both hands and places it in her marsupial pouch, daring to glimpse into her Mistress's face from beneath lowered eyelashes. She wants to read something in the way her Mistress carefully wipes the egg with her handkerchief before thrusting it into Lasa's hand, but, no, she is only projecting her own lowly thoughts. Mistress feels nothing but proper disregard for her and for the hatchling.

Lasa hopes that the egg will be High Caste when it hatches. If it turns out to be a Master or Mistress, Jandala will bring it up herself. If it's a servant, it will be Lasa's job to teach it its place in life. At least the egg has hope.

Mistress sits down and lets Lasa comb her. Lasa makes each brush stroke linger. When Mistress leans back and closes her eyes, she steals a puff of hair that has come loose on the comb and tucks it away into a fold of her dress. Afterwards, when she's alone, she'll pull it out and bring it close to her tongue to smell, before putting it away again and glancing guiltily around her.

The servants gather in the kitchen to fawn over the egg and bury Lasa in advice.

"It's a great honor."

"Yes, indeed."

"You must drink crushed shells so that the egg won't break."

"And no more jimbisters for you, lady, it's servant food and we don't want it to hatch into a servant."

"Pray every day: breathe on the statue of the Name God and ask him to make it a Master or Mistress."

"You'll do all right, it has that tint. It'll be a Master, I'm sure," Nin says.

The women fall silent, and a couple of them whisper a warding. Nin should know better than to bring the egg bad luck. The egg could be anything at this point, servant, Master, Mistress, or even . . . a monster. Many eggs don't even hatch. Dia breathes on the egg's surface to protect it.

"Put it away," Dia says. "That's enough excitement for one day."

That night, Dia says Lasa must sleep tied up. The egg is still so small that it's unlikely to break if Lasa turns over in her sleep, but Dia isn't taking any chances. She gives Lasa an old moss mattress, which used to belong to Jandala when she was young, and ties her hands to the sides of the bed.

"Will the egg be all right?" Lasa asks. "I mean, after what Nin said . . ." She's been thinking about this all day.

"Stupid Nin should know better! But I think the egg has a good chance. I'll light an incense stick for it tonight. Don't worry about it, there's nothing you can do."

The old woman busies herself with the coverlet and cushions, kisses Lasa goodnight and heads for the door.

"Dia! Don't leave yet."

The woman plods back.

"I've been thinking . . . If the egg is a servant, I'll get to keep it . . . I know I shouldn't, but I want my own hatchling. Is it wrong to feel this way?"

"Yes. You don't really want to keep it. Imagine how it will suffer if it's a servant. You must pray for it to be a Master or Mistress, hear me?"

"Yes, I know," Lasa sighs. "I just . . . Do you think my wanting a hatchling will harm its chances? Oh Gods! What if I've already turned it into a servant by thinking this all day!"

Dia chuckles and shakes her head.

"Everyone feels like that at first. What matters is what you pray for."

Over the next three days, the egg's shell grows porous and the hatchling begins to take nourishment from Lasa. She knows because the egg is now stuck inside the pouch and she's ravenous all the time.

"Lasa," Master Gundaro grunts.

Lasa freezes, poised on the tips of her feet, almost of a mind to pretend she hasn't heard and leave. She's had trouble sleeping, she's irritable, and she has discovered that a pregnant servant can get away with things. She sighs but obeys, taking only a couple of steps into the room where Master sits playing a game of solitary *wass*.

"Your pouch is small for five months," he says.

Lasa nods; she secretly wonders if something is wrong with the egg.

"They feeding you enough?"

Lasa doesn't know what to say; Dia won't let her eat as much as she wants, claiming that it isn't good to spoil the hatchling. If they'd known it'd be High Caste, there wouldn't have been much harm in spoiling it, but just in case it's a servant, it must learn to make do with what it gets.

"Yes, but I'm always hungry," she says, head lowered.

"I see. Tell Dia to let you eat. Enough eggs die as it is, I won't have ser-

vant superstitions hurting my chances. You should be glad you have Masters to take care of your lot, you people would all be dead if we left you on your own."

Lasa blushes with caste-guilt. She'd give anything to be free of it.

"Do you know how to play?" Master asks.

She nods; even servants play *wass* from time to time.

"Come. Sit. You're the only one around who isn't supposed to be working, and Mistress Jandala doesn't like this game."

Master calls Lasa back to play more and more often. Mistress stops calling Lasa in the morning to comb her hair. Dia frowns at Lasa as if she's done something wrong and servants stop whispering when she approaches. Outside, the wind-organ has changed its tune to a low, disquieting moan.

A month into their *wass* sessions, Master wraps a tentacle around Lasa's wrist. She wriggles loose and he smiles without lifting his eyes from the game, sending a chill down Lasa's spine. It's the smile of someone who knows that he'll get what he wants and isn't bothered by the wait.

"Do you know what the rebels of Quei say?"

Lasa keeps her eyes on the board.

"They say that eggs aren't only the fruit of a Master and Mistress's love. They claim that hatchlings often resemble the servant who attended at the *jaja* ceremony. They believe that a hatchling is part Mistress, part Master, part servant. It's a curious idea, neh?"

Lasa has heard the rumors, but she doesn't understand why a Master would bring this up. It's the kind of talk that Dia doesn't allow in her kitchen; filthy speculation designed to tarnish the High Caste's reputation and give servants "notions."

"But it must be wrong, don't you think? Imagine, Masters being one-third servant! Disgusting," says Gundaro.

Lasa's heart starts pounding and her breath crystallizes on her tongues. What has she done wrong? The Master is going to punish her. Why else would he speak like this? Is he trying to trap her? What does he want her to confess? She starts inventorying her small transgressions.

"Your turn," he says.

She moves the angry god figurine without thinking, leaving the pig and the cat exposed for Master to take with his air and water pieces.

He reclines in the chair, pleased with himself. The household spider, almost half a foot tall, tiptoes up to him and he pets it.

"Yes, it's disgusting," she ventures.

"You're a good girl," he whispers. His hand falls casually on her lap as he grabs Lasa's hand to keep her from leaving.

Dia is waiting up for her with a scowl to tie her up before bed. When the old woman starts scolding, Lasa breaks down. Lasa's confession spills out like a flood.

When she is finished, Dia stares at her from the corner of the bed. The old woman's cheeks are red and her tongues are dry and flustered.

"I was free," Dia mutters, and then louder, "I was free."

Lasa nods; Dia repeats this often enough.

"It's not much, but I have something," Dia continues. "Other jaja-servants have borne High Caste hatchlings. Some have only their cooking to be proud of, but we all need something to keep us alive. Pride in something. It can be a secret that only you know, but there has to be something."

The girl thinks she understands what Dia means. The old woman fingers her bead necklace, bought with the hungry days of her childhood. The necklace is there for all to see, saying *here, watch, this is me. I am not a slave*, or at least, not *only* a slave.

"He's taken that away from me," Lasa whispers.

"I know." Dia sits next to her in silence, caressing her hand. In the yard, the wind-organ grows shrill.

"You need to get it back. You need a secret," Dia mumbles. She gets up and leaves, forgetting to tie Lasa down this time.

Lasa lies back. She can't smell the hay cot beneath the moss mattress and wonders what it would feel like to sleep face down again. She misses working with the servants. It's all the egg's fault. No Master ever looked at her before she got the egg.

Lasa marvels at the freedom in her arms and legs. It's been months since she could turn in bed as she pleased. She turns, just a little, to rest on her side. She's playing with an idea, which scares and tantalizes her at the same time.

Eggs die all the time.

She settles comfortably on her side, rocking back and forth slightly. Lasa closes her eyes and pretends to be asleep.

When she rolls over on her stomach, the crunch is faint. She doesn't have to put her hands inside her pouch to know that the egg has cracked. The spilling yolk is proof enough. She knows they'll make her pay for this, but she's not the first servant to have lost an egg. Content, she falls asleep.

Lasa isn't the first servant to have lost an egg and Master only cuffs her, sending her reeling to the floor. Then he storms into the kitchen, demanding to know why she wasn't tied up. Like a spool of ribbon snagged on a bramble, Lasa's plan starts to unravel and she is powerless to stop it.

They blame Dia. She is old and not worth much, so Master has her beaten.

Lasa watches, clutching her eggless sack. The marsupial pouch will take months to regain its shape and it's unlikely it will ever be full again. High Castes have their own superstitions.

The stick beats down in rhythm as the wind-organ keens. The beater starts to sweat, but even the most obedient servant won't bring him water and he knows better than to ask.

How was Lasa to know? Eggs die all the time. She bites back the frost jelling on her face.

Some part of Dia's body cracks and the hunger-beads in her necklace fly up into the air and scatter. One of them rolls beneath Lasa's foot. She

picks it up, although she can't think of anyone who deserves it less, and puts it with its sibling in her pocket. Those eggs never hatched. Some eggs are never meant to hatch.

When it's over the servants retire to the kitchen while the beater goes to bury Dia. The women leave food at the back door so that the beater won't come knocking. Lasa sits by the basin and cleans out her pouch, removing the crusted yolk and broken shell. She rocks back and forth and hums to herself. She even laughs a little, though she doesn't know what is so funny. Her body moves automatically, while she herself is far away. The women look at each other and start muttering that she's going mad. They expect her to grieve, but Lasa doesn't know how to begin. Guilt and pain have not caught up with her yet, but she senses them creeping up on her and she wonders how she'll be able to live with what she's done.

In the meantime, Lasa clutches her belly. She has her secret. ○

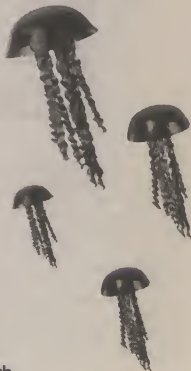
## THE FIRST DANCERS

It horrified me in fifth grade to read  
how ancient jellyfish evolved  
into stomachs with fangs and biceps,  
mosquitoes sporting javelins for stingers,  
educated men knotting yellow stars  
to arms still soft with babyfat.

Whittle a few hundred million rings  
from the trunk of our world's history,  
then behold the iridescence  
of king-sized jellyfish fanning the deep,  
their feelers curling and uncurling  
with a grace reserved for invertebrates.

Before the Amazon fell to loggers—  
long before kindling, much less stoves—  
picture schools of these peaceful dancers  
roaming the depths, gelatin comets  
gumming plankton. Then one grows a tooth.  
It begins. It cannot be stopped.

—Michael Meyerhofer



Brandon Sanderson grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. He became an avid science fiction/fantasy reader at the age of fifteen, and later decided to try his hand at writing. Brandon has published the Mistborn trilogy with Tor, and a middle-grade fantasy series, the Alcatraz Smedry books, with Scholastic. He is currently at work on *A Memory of Light*, book twelve in the Wheel of Time series, which he was asked to complete after the passing of author Robert Jordan. Brandon teaches a creative writing class at Brigham Young University. He lives in Provo, Utah, with his wife Emily and son Joel. In the author's first story for *Asimov's*, his hero must match wits with aliens and saboteurs while . . .

# DEFENDING ELYSIUM

Brandon Sanderson

**T**he woman thrashed and spasmed in the hospital bed. Her dark hair was matted to her head with sweat, and her uncontrolled motions seemed almost epileptic. Her eyes, however, did not have the wildness of the insane—instead they were focused. Determined. She was not mad; she just couldn't control her muscles. She kept waving her hands in front of her with awkward movements, movements that seemed strangely familiar to Jason.

And she did it all in silence, never uttering a word.

Jason switched off the holo-vid, then leaned back in his chair. He had watched the vid a dozen times, but it still confused him. However, he couldn't do anything until he arrived at Evensong. Until then, he would simply have to bide his time.

Jason had always felt an empathy for the Outer Platforms. There was something about the way they hung alone in space, claimed by neither planet nor star. They weren't lonely—they were . . . solitary. Autonomous.

Jason sat beside the shuttle's port window, looking at Evensong as it approached. The platform resembled others of its kind—a flat sheet of



metal fifty miles long, with buildings sprouting from both its top and bottom. It wasn't a ship, or even a space station—it was nothing more than a collection of random buildings surrounded by a bubble of air.

Of all the Outer Platforms, Evensong was the most remote. It hung between the orbits of Saturn and Uranus, the furthest deep-space human outpost. In a way, it was like an old west border town, marking the edge of civilization. Except in this case—no matter what humankind liked to think—civilization lay outside the border, not within it.

As the shuttle approached, Jason could Sense the city's separate skyrisers and towers, many of them linked by walkways. He sat with his eyes turned to the window, though the position was redundant. He had been legally blind since he'd turned sixteen. It had been years since he could even make out shadows or light. Fortunately, he had other methods of seeing.

He could Sense lights shining from windows and streets. To him, their white light was a quiet buzz in his mind. He could also Sense the line of buildings rising in a way that was almost reminiscent of an old Earth city skyline. Of course, there wasn't really a sky or a horizon. Just the blackness of space.

*Blackness.* Voices laughed in the back of his mind, memories from before. He pushed them away.

The shuttle slid into Evensong's atmospheric envelope—the platform had no sphere or force-field, like some of the older space stations employed. Element-specific gravity generators had eliminated the need for such things, and had opened space for mankind. ESG, along with fusion generators, meant that humankind could toss an inert piece of metal into space, then populate it with millions of individuals.

Jason sat back as the shuttle made its final approach. He had a private cabin, of course. It was well furnished and comfortable—a necessity for such a long trip. The room smelt faintly of his dinner—steak—and otherwise had a sterile, well-cleaned scent to it. Jason approved—if he had owned a home, he would have kept it in a similar way.

*I suppose it is time for the vacation to end,* Jason thought. Silently bidding farewell to his relaxed solitude, Jason reached up to tap the small control disk attached to the skin behind his right ear. A sound clicked in his ear—the acknowledgment that his call was being relayed across the void to Earth so far away. Faster-than-light communication—a gift given to Earth as a reward for mankind's most embarrassing political faux pas of all time.

"You called?" a perky feminine voice sounded in his ear.

Jason sighed. "Lanna?" he asked.

"Yup."

"I don't suppose anyone else is there?" Jason asked.

"Nope, just me."

"Aaron?"

"Assigned to Riely," Lanna said. "He's investigating CLA labs on Jupiter Platform Seventeen."

"Doran?"

"On maternity leave. You're stuck with me, old man."

"I'm not old," Jason said. "The shuttle has arrived. I'm initiating a constant link."

"Affirmative," Lanna replied.

Jason felt the shuttle set down in the docks. "Where's my hotel?"

"It's fairly close to the shuttle docks," Lanna replied. "It's called the Regency Fourth. You're registered as a Mr. Elton Flippenday."

Jason paused. "Elton Flippenday?" he asked flatly, feeling the docking clamps send a shudder through the ship. "What happened to my standard alias?"

"John Smith?" Lanna asked. "That's far too boring, old man."

"It's not boring," Jason said. "It's unassuming."

"Yes, well, I know rocks that are less 'unassuming' than that name. It's boring. You operatives are supposed to live lives of excitement and danger—John Smith doesn't fit."

*This is going to be a long assignment,* Jason thought.

A quiet sound buzzed in the room—an indication that the docking had finished. Jason rose, fetched his single bag of luggage, slid on his sunglasses, and left his quarters. He knew the glasses would look odd, but his sightless eyes tended to put people on edge, especially when they discovered that he was obviously able to see, despite his unfocused pupils.

"So, how was the trip?" Lanna asked.

"Fine," Jason said tersely, walking down the shuttle's hallway and nodding toward the captain. The man ran a good crew—in Jason's opinion, any crew that left him alone was a good one.

"Come on," Lanna prodded in his ear. "It had to be more than just 'fine.' What kind of food did they serve? Did you have any problems with the . . ." She droned on, but Jason stopped paying attention. He was focused on something else—a slight warble in Lanna's voice. It sounded for only a brief second, but Jason immediately knew what it meant. The line was being tapped.

Lanna had undoubtedly heard it as well—she was loquacious, but not incompetent—but she continued as if nothing had happened. She would wait for Jason's signal.

"How are the kids?" Jason asked.

"My nephews?" Lanna replied, not breaking the rhythm of her conversation as she received his coded request. "The older one's fine, but the youngest has the flu."

The young one was sick. That meant the tap was on Jason's end, not hers. *Interesting*, he thought. Someone had managed to get close enough to scan his control disk without him noticing.

Lanna fell silent. She was preparing a tap block, but would only act if Jason ordered it. He didn't.

Instead, he stepped out of the shuttle and walked down the short ramp to the arrival station. Spread before him sat a line of scanning arches, meant to search for weaponry. Jason strode through them without concern—there wasn't a scanner in human space that could discover his weapons. He nodded with a smile as he passed a guard; the man smelt faintly of tobacco and was wearing a blue uniform that registered as a pulsing rhythm in Jason's mind. The guard frowned as he saw the silver PC pin on Jason's lapel, then turned a suspicious eye on his scanners.

Jason stepped aside as the other passengers formed a line at the regis-

tration counter, ostensibly searching for his ID. He watched them with his Sense, however, his useless eyes turned downward. Most of the people wore the soft rhythm of navy, the roar of white, or the still silence of black. None of them stood out, but he memorized the patterns of their faces. The person who had tapped his line must have been on the shuttle.

After they had all passed, Jason pretended to find his ID—one of the old plastic ones, rather than a new holo-vid card. A tired security man, his breath smelling of coffee, accepted the ID and began processing Jason's papers. The guard was a young man, and his skin was tinted blue after one of the newer fashion trends. The man worked slowly, and Jason's eyes drifted to a holo-vid playing on the back counter. It displayed a news program.

"... found murdered in an incineration building," the anchor said.

Jason snapped upright.

"Jason," Lanna's voice said urgently in his ear. "I just picked something up on the newsfeeds. There's been a—"

"I know," Jason said, accepting his ID back and dashing out of the customs station and onto the street.

Captain Orson Ansed, Evensong PD, hustled through Topside's slums. It still surprised him that Evensong had slums—all of the platform's buildings were built of rich telanium, a super-light, silvery metal that didn't corrode or fall apart. In fact, most of the buildings had been prefabricated with the platform, and were actually an extension of its sheet-like hull. The buildings were spacious, well constructed, and sleek.

And still there were slums. It didn't matter that Evensong's poor lived in homes that many wealthy Earthsiders couldn't afford. By comparison, they were still poor. Somehow, their dwellings reflected that. There was a sense of despair to the area. Shiny, modern buildings were hung with ragged drapes and drying clothing. Aircars were rare; pedestrians common.

"Over here, captain," one of his men said, motioning toward a building. It was long and squat—though, like all buildings on the platform, it had other structures built on top of it. The officer, a new kid named Ken Harris, led Orson inside, and Orson was immediately struck by a pungent smoky scent. The building was a burning station, where organic materials were recycled.

Officers moved about in the darkened room. Like most buildings on Evensong, this one was poorly lit. Evensong's distance from the sun kept it in a perpetual state of twilight, and the platform's inhabitants had grown accustomed to having less light. Many of them kept the lights dim even indoors. The tendency had bothered Orson at first, but he rarely even noticed it any more.

Several officers saluted, and Orson waved them down with a petulant gesture. "What've we got here?"

"Come and look, sir," Harris said, weaving through some equipment toward the back of the room.

Orson followed; eventually they stopped beside a massive cylindrical burner. Its metallic face was dark and flat. One of the bottom reservoir doors was open, revealing the dust below. Mixed with the dirt and ash was a large section of carapace, its shell stained black from the heat.

Orson swore quietly, kneeling beside the carapace. He poked at the shell with a stirring rod. "I assume this is our missing ambassador?"

"That is what we assume, sir," Harris said.

Great, Orson thought with a sigh. The Varvax had been asking about their ambassador since his disappearance two weeks before.

"What do we know?" Orson asked.

"Not much," Harris said. "These burners are only emptied once a month. The carapace has been in there for some time—there's almost nothing left of it. Any longer, and we wouldn't have even found him."

*That might have been preferable*, Orson thought. "What did the sensor net record?"

"Nothing," Harris said.

"Does the media know about this?" Orson asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid so, sir," Harris said. "The worker who found the body leaked the information."

Orson sighed. "All right, then, let's . . ."

Orson trailed off. A figure was silhouetted in the building's open door—a figure not wearing a police uniform. Orson swore quietly, standing. The officers outside were supposed to keep the press out.

"I'm sorry," Orson said, walking toward the intruder. "But this area's restricted. You can't . . ."

The man ignored him. He was tall and thin, with a triangular face and short-cropped black hair. He wore a simple black suit, a little outdated but otherwise undistinctive, and a pair of dark glasses. He brushed past Orson with an air of indifference.

Orson reached out to grab the insolent stranger, but froze. There was a gleaming pin on the man's lapel—a small silver bell.

*What!* Orson thought with amazement. *When did a PC operative get here? How did he know?* The questions didn't really matter—regardless of their answers, one thing was certain. Orson's jurisdiction had come to an end.

The Phone Company had arrived.

It had finally happened a hundred and forty years before, in the year 2071. Oddly enough, the ones who had made First Contact had been an outdated, nearly bankrupt phone company.

Northern Bell Incorporated had been on the losing side of technological progress. While its competitors had been researching and incorporating holo-vid technology, Northern Bell had tried something a little more daring: cybernetic-based telepathic linking.

Cyto, as it was dubbed, had turned out to be a failure. Holo-vid technology was not only cheaper and more stable, it had also worked. Cyto had not worked—at least, not as Northern Bell had hoped. In the last days before its impending bankruptcy, the company had finally managed to get a few squeaks of sound through the system. Those squeaks, while unimpressive to their human monitors, were also inadvertently projected through space to a group of beings known as the Tenasi. The Tenasi reply had been the first inter-species contact Earth had ever known.

Second contact had been made by the United Governments Military

when they accidentally shot down a Tenasi ambassadorial vessel. But that, of course, was an entirely different story.

"He's been missing for two weeks?" Jason asked, kneeling beside the burned carapace. It was silent in his mind—a foreboding indication of its black color.

"Yes, sir," the officer said.

"Yup," Lanna said at almost the same time.

"Why wasn't I informed of this?" Jason asked.

The police officer looked confused for a moment before realizing that Jason wasn't talking to him. Ear-links were a common, if confusing, part of modern life.

"I assumed you knew, old man," Lanna said. "You know, Jason, for an all-knowing spy type, you're remarkably uninformed."

Jason grunted, standing. She was right—he should have looked into local news stories during his trip. It was too late now.

The officer regarded Jason with hard eyes. Jason could read the man's emotions easily. Not through the use of his Cyto Senses—it was a common misconception that psionics were telepathic. No, Jason could read the man's emotions because he was accustomed to dealing with local law enforcement. The officer would be annoyed at Jason for interfering with his investigation. But, at the same time, the officer would be relieved. Local men always felt overwhelmed when it came to dealing with other species. Aliens were to be handled by the Phone Company; the PC had made first contact, the PC had negotiated Earth out of danger following the Tenasi incident. The PC had brought FTL communication to humankind.

So, the officer watched Jason—jealous, but thankful. Jason could hear other officers muttering at the edges of the room, angry at his interference. *Dirty PC. Why is he here? Why does he look at us like that? Can't you see? What's that in front of your face? Is it my fist? Can you see it if I hit you? Maybe that will—*

"Jason?" Lanna's voice sounded in his ear.

Jason snapped upright, muscles twitching, memories fading. He still knelt beside the burner. The officer still stood staring at him, the room still smelt overpoweringly of smoke, and he could still hear the reporters arguing with officers outside.

"I'm all right," Jason whispered.

He stood, dusting off his suit, listening to the reporters. They, like the policemen, would probably assume that Jason had come to Evensong to investigate the Ambassador's death. It didn't matter that Jason's shuttle had left for Evensong over a month before the murder. An alien had died, and a PC operative had arrived. That would be enough for them.

"I shouldn't have come to the scene," he mumbled.

"What else would you have done?" Lanna asked. "This is our duty, after all."

"Not mine," Jason said. "I'm here to retrieve a missing scientist, not investigate a murder." Then, speaking louder, he continued. "I'm certain the local law enforcement is competent. Let them investigate—the PC can handle diplomatic negotiations."

The officer looked surprised. But, apparently uncertain what else to do, he saluted Jason. Jason nodded, then turned to leave.

"Not that the 'diplomatic negotiations' will be too hard," Lanna noted. "The Varvax are so insanely docile that they'll probably apologize for inconveniencing one of our murderers."

"They're all like that," Jason said, stepping out onto the building's front steps. "That's the big problem, isn't it?"

There was a moment of shocked silence as the reporters realized who he was. They stood in a ring around several beleaguered police, and the commotion was attracting a crowd of curious onlookers. Then the reporters exploded with questions. Jason ignored them, pushing his way through the crowd. He had his head bowed, his hand raised to forestall questions. However, in his mind he was looking.

He scanned the crowd, pushing through the humming and pulsing colors. He studied each face, comparing them to the ones in his memory. A smile crept to his lips as he found what he was after. The media let him leave—they were used to the PC ignoring their questions. Behind him, Jason could hear their on-the-spot vidcasts. They had all the facts wrong, of course. There was fear in their voices—a fear of what they didn't understand, a fear of the retribution that might come. In their world, retribution was assumed. In their world, you hurt that which was weaker than you.

Jason continued to walk with his head bowed. Behind him, a man broke free from the group of onlookers and wandered in Jason's direction, obviously trying to look casual.

"I wish there were more flowers," Jason said.

A second later, a click sounded in his ear. Then Lanna sighed. "What took you so long?" she demanded. "I've been waiting for you to do that ever since you got off the shuttle. I feel creepy knowing someone's hacking our line."

Jason continued to stroll forward. His shadow followed—the man moved with the skill of one who had been well-trained, but he made the mistakes of one who was inexperienced. There was no change to his step—he probably hadn't noticed the switchover. At that moment, he would be listening to a fabricated conversation between Lanna and Jason. For some reason, Jason suspected he didn't want to know what kind of silly things Lanna's replicated version of his voice was saying.

"Is he buying it?" Lanna asked.

"I think so," Jason said, walking away from the slums. "He's still following."

"Who do you think he's with?"

"I'm not sure yet." Jason turned, taking the steps down into an airtrain station. The man followed.

"If you caught him this quickly, he must not be very good."

"He's young," Jason said. "He knows what he's supposed to do, but he doesn't know how to do it."

"A reporter," Lanna guessed.

"No," Jason said. "He's too well-equipped. Remember, he managed to hack into a secure FTL comm."



"One of the corporations?"

"Maybe," Jason said, strolling into an underground café. It smelt of dirt, mold, and coffee. His follower waited for a few moments outside, then walked in and took a table a discreet distance from Jason.

Jason ordered a cup of coffee.

"We haven't even discussed how he managed to scan your disk," Lanna noted. "You're losing your edge, old man."

"I'm not old," Jason mumbled as the waitress brought his coffee. It smelt of cream, though he had ordered it black. He turned his ineffectual eyes on a newspaper someone else had left on the table, but his mind studied his follower. The man was indeed young—in his early twenties. He wore softly humming grays and browns.

"So," Lanna said, "do you want to try and get me a visual so I can look him up?"

Jason paused. "No," he said finally, taking a sip of his coffee. It had far too much cream in it—probably an attempt to obscure its poor flavor.

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"Be patient," Jason chided.

Coln Abrams sipped his coffee—it didn't have enough cream. He kept telling himself not to look at his target. He didn't actually need to watch the man to monitor the conversation, he just had to stay within range.

*What are you doing here, Write?* Coln wondered with frustration. *How did you know the ambassador would be killed? What does this all have to do with your plans?*

Coln shook his head. Jason Write, head operative for Northern Bell Phone Company, one of the most enigmatic people in the Solar System. What was he doing on Evensong? The United Intelligence Bureau knew a lot about the man, but for every known fact there seemed to be two more missing.

Take, for instance, the Tenasi agreement. Coln had read the document itself a hundred times, and had watched the holo-vids, commentaries, and old newscasts relating to the Tenasi incident over and over. The United Governments military had accidentally shot down a Tenasi diplomatic vessel—thereby initiating a rather embarrassing First Contact. Earth had been thrown into a chaos of confusion and worry. Were they being invaded? Would they be invaded now that they had made such a horrible mistake?

Then the PC had stepped in. Somehow—using means they had yet to explain—they had contacted the Tenasi. The PC had brought peace to Earth. But in exchange, the company had demanded a steep price. From that moment on, the PC had become completely autonomous—untaxable, unquestionable, and completely above the law. In addition, the PC had secured sole rights to the aliens' FTL communications technology. And, with those two concessions, the PC had become the most powerful, most arrogant force in the system.

Coln gripped his mug tightly, barely noticing as the waitress brought his sandwich. He was still listening to the conversation between Write and his Base Support Operative—they were discussing which color roses they liked best.

Coln had never trusted the PC—and he hated things he couldn't trust. The PC grew fat off its treaties—it held exclusive contracts with all twelve alien races humankind had met. The alien races all refused to deal with Earth unless they went through the PC first. The Phone Company kept humankind locked in space, refusing to share FTL travel technology. It claimed that the aliens had yet to give it to them. Coln suspected he knew the truth. The aliens had FTL travel, that was certain. The PC was simply keeping it from humankind, and that infuriated Coln. He wanted to find—

Coln froze. The conversation in his ear had stopped mid-sentence. For a panicked moment, Coln feared that Write had slipped out of the restaurant and out of range.

Coln's eyes darted across the room. He was relieved to find Write sitting in his booth, sipping quietly on his coffee. It had simply been a lull in the conversation.

"What do you think he'll do when he realizes his cover is blown?" the Base Support Operative, Lanna, said in Coln's ear.

Coln paused.

"I don't know." Jason Write's voice was firm. Arrogant. Coln could see Write's lips moving as he spoke. "I suspect he will be surprised. He's young—he assumes he's better than he really is."

Write looked up, his sunglassed eyes looking directly at Coln's face. Horror rose in Coln's chest, an emotion quickly followed by shame. He'd been discovered.

"Come here, boy," Write ordered in Coln's ear.

Coln shot a look at the door. He could probably get away—

"If you leave," Write said, "then you will never discover why I am on Evensong." His voice was sharp and businesslike.

Coln regarded the man indecisively. What should he do? Why hadn't any of his classes covered situations like this one? When an agent was discovered, he was supposed to pull out. But what if his target seemed willing to talk to him?

Slowly, Coln rose and crossed the café's dirty floor. Write's sunglasses watched him quietly. Coln stood for a moment beside Write's table, then sat stiffly.

*Don't reveal anything, Coln warned himself. Don't let him know that you're with the—*

"You are young for an UIB agent," Write said.

Inwardly, Coln sighed. *He already knows. What have I gotten myself—and the Bureau—into?*

"I wonder," Write said, taking a sip of his coffee. "Is the Bureau growing more confident in its young agents, or am I simply slipping in priority?"

*He doesn't know!* Coln realized with surprise. *He thinks I'm here officially.*

"Neither," Coln said, thinking quickly. "We weren't ready for you to leave. I was the only field agent who was unassigned at the time. It was simply poor luck."

Write nodded to himself.

*He accepted it!*

"I must say," Write said, setting down his mug. "I am growing tired of the UIB. Every time I think that you people are going to leave me alone, I find myself being followed again."

"If the PC weren't so untrustworthy," Coln said, "its Operatives wouldn't have to worry about being followed."

"If the Bureau wasn't so poor at investigation," Write said, "it would have realized by now that the PC is the only company that the Bureau *can* trust."

Coln flushed. "Are you going to say something useful, or are you just going to insult me?"

"A clever man would realize that my insults contain the most useful information he'll likely receive," Write said.

Coln snorted, rising from the chair. Write had just invited him over to gloat, and Coln had ruined his own career for nothing. He had been so certain that he could tail Write, that he could figure out what the man was doing, discover the truth behind the Tenasi Agreement. . . .

"You may accompany me," Write said, finishing his coffee.

Coln paused mid-step. "What?"

Write set down his mug. "You want to know what I'm doing? Well, you may come with me. Maybe this will finally alleviate the UIB's foolish suspicions—I'm tired of being followed."

"Jason," Lanna said in Coln's ear. "Are you certain—"

"No," Write said. "I'm not. However, I don't have time to deal with the UIB right now. This is a simple mission—the boy may come with me if he wishes."

Coln stood, dumbfounded. He couldn't decide what to do. Could he really trust a PC operative? No, he couldn't. But, what if he learned something important? "I—"

"Hush," Write said suddenly, holding up a hand.

Coln frowned. Write wasn't looking at him, however. He was staring straight ahead, his face confused.

*Now what?* Coln wondered.

Something was wrong. Jason ran his mind around the room, trying to Sense what was bothering him. The café had about a dozen other occupants, all eating quietly. Most of them were in workers' clothing—flannels and denim that pulsed an irregular symphony in Jason's mind. He studied their faces, and recognized none of them. What was bothering him?

A line of bullets blasted through the window just beside Jason. They came far too fast for his body to react or dodge, moving with the incredible speed of modern weaponry.

As fast as the bullets were, however, Jason's mind was faster. He whipped out, a dozen invisible mindblades slashing through the air. The force of his attack slapped the bullets backward as well as sliced each one in two. There was a series of audible clicks as the pieces bounced back off the window, then fell to the café floor. All was silent.

The UIB kid plopped into his seat, his face horrified as he stared at the window and its holes.

"Jason?" Lanna said urgently. "Jason, what happened?"

Jason sensed out the window, but the sniper was already gone. "I don't know."

"Someone shot at you?" Lanna asked with concern.

Jason regarded the bullet holes—they ran in a small circle in the window just beside the UIB kid's head. "No," he said. "They tried to kill the kid."

The café's patrons were running about in fear, some calling out, others hiding beneath benches. The UIB kid was looking down at himself with surprise, as if he couldn't believe that he was still alive. "They all missed," the boy whispered with amazement.

Jason frowned. Why would someone try to kill a UIB agent? Why not focus on Jason? The PC was a far more dangerous threat.

"How did you let him sneak up on you like that?" Lanna asked.

"I wasn't expecting to be shot at. This was supposed to be a simple assignment." Then, turning to the kid, he nodded. "Let's go."

The kid looked up with surprise. "Someone tried to kill me! Why?"

"I'm not certain," Jason said. He ran his Sense over the room one last time, memorizing faces. As he did so, he noticed something. While most of the people were hiding or quivering in fear, one didn't seem to be concerned at all. A solitary form sat quietly at the back of the café. He was a nondescript man with a long nose and a firm body. He watched Jason with interested eyes—eyes that seemed slightly unfocused. Almost as if . . .

*Impossible!* Jason thought. Then, without bothering to see if the UIB kid followed him, he left the café.

"You must take the apologies of us," Sonn urged. The Varvax Foreign Minister's words were delivered by a translating program, of course—the Varvax language consisted of clicks and snaps mitigated by hand gestures. The figure on the holo-vid screen was large and boxy, and its skin shone of quartz and granite. That was, of course, only the exoskeleton—the Varvax were actually small creatures that floated in a nutrient bath sealed within their inorganic shells.

"Sonn," Jason pointed out, sitting back in his chair, "your people were the victims here. Your ambassador was murdered."

Sonn waved a claw-like hand; a symbol of denial. "You must understand that he knew the risks of living in an undeveloped civilization. Creatures of lesser intelligence cannot be held responsible for their acts of barbarity. You have not yet learned a better way."

Jason smiled to himself. Comments like that one were what earned the Varvax, and most other alien races, humankind's disgust. It didn't matter that the comments were true—in fact, the truth of such statements only enraged humankind more.

"We will return what is left of the body as soon as possible, Minister Sonn," Jason promised.

"Thank you, Jason of the Phone Company. You must tell to me—how go your efforts at civilization? Will your people soon raise themselves to Primary Intelligence?"

"It will take some time yet, Minister Sonn," Jason said.

"You are an interesting people, Jason of the Phone Company," Sonn said, his claws held before him in a gesture of supplication.

"You may speak on."

"You have such disparity amongst what you are," Sonn said. "Some of Primary Intelligence, some of Third—or even Fourth—Intelligence. Such disparity. You must tell to me; are your people still convinced of the power of technology?"

Jason shrugged an exaggerated shrug—the Varvax liked to watch and interpret human gestures. "Humankind believes in technology, Minister Sonn. It will be very difficult for them to accept another way."

"Of course, Jason of the Phone Company. We will speak to each other again."

"We will speak again," Jason said, shutting off the holo-vid. He sat for a moment, Sensing the room around him. He couldn't just relax completely anymore—he missed that. If he let his concentration lapse, the darkness would come upon him.

"They certainly are confident, aren't they?" Lanna asked in his ear.

"They have reason to be," Jason replied. "It has always happened as they expect. A race discovers FTL Cytonic Transmission at the same time it achieves a peaceful civilization."

"If only they weren't so cursed ingenuous," Lanna said. "A part of me kind of wishes I had three Varvax diplomats, a card table, and a host of 'useless' technologies I could cheat out of them."

"That's the problem," Jason said. "There's a little of that in all of us."

"What if they're wrong, Jason?" Lanna asked. "What if we do get FTL travel before we're 'civilized'?"

Jason didn't reply—he didn't know the answer.

"I looked up the kid for you," Lanna offered.

"Go on," Jason said, rising and gathering his things. The attack the day before still had him worried. Was it an attempt to scare Jason off? From what?

"The day you left, a young UIB agent named Coln Abrams disappeared from the Bureau's training facilities on Jupiter Fourteen," Lanna said. "He stole some sophisticated monitoring equipment. The UIB put out several warrants for him, but they aren't looking this far—apparently they didn't expect him to make it all the way to Evensong."

"It isn't exactly a prime vacationing spot," Jason noted, strolling over to the window and trying to imagine what the city would look like to normal eyes. It would be dark, he decided—most of it didn't vibrate very much to him at all. Dark and tall, like a city constructed entirely of alleyways. Lights were sparse and insufficient, and the air smelt musty. It always seemed to be a few degrees below standard temperature, too—as if the vacuum of space were closer, more ominous, than it really was.

"So," Lanna said, "we've got a wanted felon. Can we turn him in?"

"No," Jason said, turning from the window and putting on his suit-coat and sliding on his dark glasses.

"Come on, let's turn him in," Lanna said. "In fact, it was probably the UIB who tried to have him killed yesterday."

"They don't work that way," Jason said, walking to the door. "Do you have my permits secured?"

"Yes," Lanna said.

"Good. Turn the kid back on and let's get going."

The image was blurred and poorly exposed. Unfortunately, it was the best he had. Coln walked around the large holo-image, studying it as he had hundreds of times before. The answer was before him; he could feel it. The image held a secret. Yet Coln, like thousands of others, was unable to determine just what that secret might be.

The image had been taken by the only spy to infiltrate the PC's central headquarters. It was a picture of a simple white room with an apparatus lining the back wall. That apparatus, whatever it was, powered all of humankind's FTL communications.

It was the greatest secret of the modern age. Humankind had been trying for nearly two centuries to break the PC's monopoly on FTL communication. Unfortunately, no amount of research had been able to duplicate the PC's strange technology—and, until someone did, humankind would be indebted to a tyrant.

*It has to be here!* Coln thought, staring at the unyielding image. He walked around it to look at several angles. *If only it weren't so blurry.*

He looked closely at the holo-image. A security guard sat against the right side of the room, staring in the photographer's direction. There seemed to be several cylindrical outcroppings on the far wall—relays of some kind? One was larger than the others, and dark in color. Was it the answer?

Coln sighed. Men far more technologically savvy than he had tried to dissect the image, but none had been able to draw any decisive conclusions. The picture was just too fuzzy to be of much use.

He had spent the entire morning trying to decide why someone would try to kill him. He had only been able to come to one decision—that for some reason, Write had ordered him assassinated. The PC agent had been the one who had coerced Coln over to sit beside him, in the place where the assassin had shot. The PC was behind it somehow.

*Except the assassin missed,* Coln thought. *He must have done so on purpose. Write wanted to scare me off. He acted like he didn't care if I followed him, then he tried to frighten me away.*

Coln nodded. It made sense, in a twisted PC sort of way. And if Write didn't want him along, then Coln had to make certain he stayed.

"Wake up, kid," Lanna's voice crackled suddenly in his ear.

"I'm awake," Coln said, bristling at the reference to his age—twenty-three was hardly young enough to earn him the title of "kid." At least the other two had stopped feeding him dummy conversations—when they didn't want him to listen, they simply shut him out completely.

"The big guy's leaving," Lanna said in her pert voice. Coln was beginning to wonder why Write put up with her. "He says you can go with him, but only if you can keep up."

Coln cursed, throwing on his jacket.

"Oh, and Coln," Lanna said, "try not to steal anything from him. Jason's kind of attached to his equipment."

Coln flushed. How much did they know?

He dashed out into the hallway just in time to see Write's black-suited



form turn a corner. Coln padded across the floor, catching up to the operative. Write barely acknowledged him. They walked in silence to the end of the hallway, then took the private lift down to the lobby. The lush carpets and rich furnishings hinted that they were far indeed from the previous day's slums.

"So, what is it?" Coln asked as they stepped out onto the silver telanium street. The street, like always, was dimly lit—though hundreds of lights shone from windows and signs. Evensong was dark, but it did not sleep.

"What is what?" Write asked as an aircab—obviously chartered—pulled up in front of the hotel.

"What is your purpose here, Write?" Coln asked, climbing into the back of the car beside the operative. "I assume you knew something about the ambassador's death?"

"You assume wrong," Write said as the aircab began to move. "The ambassador's murder was a coincidence."

Coln raised an eyebrow in skepticism.

"Believe me or not, I don't really care."

"Then why are you here?" Coln asked.

Write sighed. "Tell him."

"It happened just under two months ago, kid," Lanna said, "a scientist named Denise Carlson disappeared from Evensong's PC research facility."

Coln frowned at the comment, searching through his memory. He paid attention to anything the Bureau learned about the PC. He recalled something about the scientist's disappearance, but it hadn't seemed very important.

"But," Coln said, "our reports said she was nothing more than a lab assistant. The PC home office barely paid attention to her disappearance—it said that she had been the victim of a common street mugging."

"Well, at least someone pays attention to current events," Lanna said.

Write snorted. "He might pay attention, but he should have realized that any story we downplay is far more important than it seems."

Coln blushed. "So, you came to find this Denise Carlson?"

"Wrong," Lanna said. "That's why he left, but that's not the goal any more. While Jason was in transit, we located Miss Carlson. Just under two weeks ago a woman fitting her description was picked up by authorities. She was diagnosed with severe mental problems, and was checked into a local treatment ward."

"So . . ." Coln said.

"So I'm here to retrieve her," Write said. "Nothing more. We're going to bring her back to Jupiter Fourteen so that she can receive proper treatment. My role is that of a simple courier." Write smiled slightly, turning his black glasses toward Coln. "That is why I am willing to let you tag along. You sacrificed your career so you could watch me escort a mental patient."

Jason strode into the hospital, the depressed Coln tagging along behind. The kid kept asking questions, convinced that Jason's actions had some greater purpose in the PC's "master plans." Jason was beginning to

regret bringing him along—the last thing he needed was another person jabbering at him.

The nurse at the front desk looked up with surprise when he entered, her eyes flickering toward his silver lapel pin.

“Mr. Flippenday?” she asked.

He paused only briefly at the horrid name. “I am. Show me to the patient.”

The nurse nodded, leaving the desk to another attendant and waving Jason to follow. She wore white—a roaring, blatant color. Better the subtle hum of gray. The walls were white as well, and the hallways smelt of cleaning fluids.

*Why do they do that?* Jason wondered, shaking his head slightly. *Do they think that it will make their patients feel at home? Lifeless sterility and monochrome white? Perhaps all these people need to regain their sanity is a little bit of color.*

The nurse led them to a simple room with a locked door—ostensibly for the patient’s safety.

“I’m glad you finally decided to come,” the nurse said, a slightly chiding tone in her voice. “We contacted the PC weeks ago, and the woman’s just been waiting here all this time. With no relatives on the Platform, one would think that you people . . .”

She trailed off as Jason turned toward her. After losing his eyesight, he had eventually learned that a look of discontent could be accomplished as much with one’s bearing as with one’s eyes. As he stared sightlessly at the nurse, her resolve weakened, and the punitive tone left her voice.

“That is enough,” Jason said simply.

“Yes, sir,” the nurse mumbled, shooting him a spiteful look as she unlocked the door.

Jason walked into the small, unadorned room. Denise sat beside a desk—the room’s only furniture besides a bed and a dresser. She regarded Jason with wide eyes. She looked much like his holo-vid—she was thin, her short dark hair in curls, and she wore a simple skirt and blouse.

Jason had met her several times before—Denise had shown an affinity for Cyto, and had been midway through her training. She had once been a straightforward and calculating woman. Now she looked like a young squirrel that hadn’t yet learned to fear predators.

“They said you would come,” she whispered, the words awkward in her mouth. “Do you know who I am?”

Jason looked toward the nurse.

“She’s amnesiac,” the nurse said. “Though we can’t determine any physical reason for it. She also has some sort of muscular problem—she has trouble keeping her balance and controlling her limbs.”

Denise demonstrated as much, rising slowly to her feet. She wobbled slightly as she walked forward, but she managed to remain on her feet.

“She’s made amazing progress,” the nurse said. “She can walk now if she doesn’t move too quickly.”

“Denise, you’re coming with me,” Jason said. “Abrams, help her walk.”

The kid looked up with surprise. Jason didn’t give him time to complain—instead, Jason turned and strode from the room. Abrams cursed

quietly, but did as Jason ordered, giving the confused Denise a helpful arm as they walked from the hospital.

They were nearly out when Jason noticed something. He never would have seen it without his Sense—the man hid behind a door, barely peeking out. The Sense was far more discerning than normal eyes, however, and Jason recognized the face even through the door's small slit. It was one of the men from the café—not the strange man who had sat at the booth, but one of the regular workers.

*So they've been watching her,* Jason thought as he left the building, the kid and Denise following. *Did they expect her to reveal something, or did they know that I would come for her?*

"I do not know what this means," Denise said, staring at the menu with her wide eyes. She looked up, confused.

"You can't read?" Jason asked.

"No," Denise replied.

"Here, let me help," Abrams offered, reading down the list of items.

Jason sat back, allowing himself a slight smile. The kid was showing an almost chivalrous devotion to the amnesiac woman. She was passably attractive, in a sickeningly innocent sort of way. Abrams was just betraying the inherent predisposition of a young human male; he had seen a woman in need and was trying to help her.

Denise raised her hand awkwardly in an odd gesture as Coln read. "I still do not know what it means."

"None of the words sound familiar?" Jason asked, leaning forward with interest.

"No."

"But you can speak," Jason mused. "What do you remember?"

"Nothing," Denise said. "I don't remember anything, Mr. Flippenday."

Jason cringed. "Call me Jason," he mumbled as Abrams asked the girl what kind of food she liked. She, of course, didn't know.

She should have remembered more. Most amnesiacs remembered something—if only fragments. "What do you think?" Jason whispered.

"It's odd," Lanna said. "She's changed, old man. Whatever they did to her, it was pretty thorough."

"Agreed."

Abrams ordered for the girl and himself—choosing, Jason noticed, two of the most expensive items on the menu. He knew that Jason would be paying. At least the kid had style.

As he sat, Jason thought back to the strange man in the café. The man couldn't have access to Cyto—in a hundred and fifty years, no one had discovered the ability besides the PC. But what if someone had? What if they had learned about Denise, and had captured her to try and learn what she knew? What had they done to get at her knowledge?

His ponderings led him nowhere. Eventually the food came, and Jason began to eat. He preferred simple meals, so he had ordered a tossed pasta dish with a very light sauce. He ate quietly, thoughtful as he watched a man a short distance away haggle over his bill with the waiter.

He shouldn't have been worried about the ambassador's death. The po-

lice would probably find that the murder had been committed by some xenophobic activist group. They were prevalent. There were those who hated other species because of assumed superiority, those that hated them because they thought the aliens were too arrogant, and those who simply hated them because they were different. The student-sponsorship program, where human children would be sent to other planets to learn about other species, had been defeated three times in the United Senate.

The ambassador's death probably wasn't related to Denise. Jason should leave—there were too many things that demanded his attention for him to waste time chasing false leads. This trip had taken far too long already.

Jason paused. Denise had turned and was staring at the man who was arguing about his bill. He raised his fist at the waiter, uttering a few epithets, then finally slapped down some bills and stalked out of the building.

"Why is he like that?" Denise asked. "How can he be so angry?"

"That's just the way people are sometimes," Coln said uncomfortably. "How is your food?"

Denise turned her eyes down at the steak. She had taken several awkward bites, though Coln had been forced to cut it for her. "It's very . . ."

"Very what?" Jason prompted.

"I do not know," Denise confessed, blushing. "It tastes too . . . strong. One of the flavors is very odd."

Jason frowned. "What flavor?"

"I do not know. It was very strong in the hospital's food too, though I didn't say anything. I didn't want to offend them."

"Describe the taste to me," Jason said. Something was tickling at the back of his mind—a connection he should have made.

"Leave her alone, old man," Abrams said. "She's been through a lot."

Jason raised his eyebrows at the use of "old man." He heard Lanna chuckling through the FTL link. Jason ignored Abrams, turning his head toward Denise. "Describe the taste to me."

"I can't," Denise finally said. "You must understand—I don't know what it is."

Jason reached for the salt shaker, then sprinkled some of it on his hand. "Taste this," he ordered.

She did as asked, then nodded. "That's it. I do not like it very much."

Abrams rolled his eyes. "You've figured out that she doesn't know the word for salty. So? She doesn't know what any of these foods are, or even what her name is."

Jason sat back, ignoring the kid. Then he turned to his food and continued to eat in silence.

"I've arranged your return trip to Jupiter," Lanna said. "You'll be leaving on the courier ship *Excel* at 10:30 PM, local time."

Jason nodded to himself. He stood on his balcony, leaning against the railing as he listened to Lanna's voice in his ear.

"The ship is a good one, and always punctual—as you like them," Lanna said. "Your accommodations are for two people."

Jason didn't reply. He Sensed Evensong before him, feeling its massive metallic buildings and numerous walkways. Sometimes, he tried to remember what it had been like to see. He tried to imagine colors as images, rather than as Cytonic vibrations, but he had trouble. It had been so long, and his eyes hadn't been very good in the first place.

Evensong was in motion around him—aircars flew, people moved on the walkways, lights flickered on and off. It was beautiful, in a way. It was beautiful that humankind had expanded this far, that it had found a way to thrive even here, in the middle of space, where the sun was barely more than another star.

"You're not coming back yet, are you?" Lanna asked quietly.

"No."

"So you think the ambassador's death might be related?"

"I'm not certain," Jason said. "Maybe. Something is bothering me, Lanna."

"About the murder?" she asked.

"No. About our scientist. Something about Denise is . . . wrong."

"What?"

Jason paused. "I'm not sure. She learned to walk and talk too quickly, for one thing."

Lanna didn't respond immediately. "I'm not certain what to tell you," she finally said.

Jason sighed, shaking his head. He didn't really understand what he meant either. He stood quietly for a moment, watching the flow of people on a walkway a short distance away. Something was wrong—he couldn't decide what it was, but he knew what he feared. For over a century, the PC had maintained a monopoly on Cyto. He didn't expect psychic ability to remain confined to the PC—in fact, it was his ultimate goal that it not be. The very thing he was working toward was what he feared.

"Jason," Lanna asked, "have you ever worried that what we're doing is wrong?"

"Every day."

"I mean," Lanna continued, "what if they're right? The Tenasi, the Varvax, and the rest—they're all much older than humankind is. They know more than we do. Maybe they're right—maybe humankind will become civilized before it obtains FTL travel. Maybe by holding Cyto back from them, we're keeping ourselves from progressing as we should."

Jason stood quietly beside the balcony, listening to the sound of children running on the walkway below. *Children, laughing . . .*

"Lanna," he said, "do you know how the Inter-species Monitoring Coalition rates a race's intelligence class?"

"No."

"They look at the race's children," Jason said quietly. "The older ones. Children who have lived just long enough to begin imitating the society they see around them, children who have lost the innocence of youth but haven't yet replaced it with the tact and mores of adulthood. In those children, you can see what a species is really like. From them, the Varvax determine whether a species is civilized or barbaric."

"And we failed that test," Lanna said.

"Miserably."

"That's all right," Lanna said. "Every race fails it during the early part of their growth. We'll get there eventually."

"The Tenasi had barely begun using steam power when they made their first FTL jump," Jason said. "The Varvax weren't far behind them—they still didn't have computers. Both species traveled to other planets before they learned to send a shuttle into space."

Lanna fell quiet.

"We've been in space for nearly three centuries now," Jason continued. "The Varvax say that technology isn't the way—they claim that technological development has boundaries, but that a sentient mind is limitless. But . . . still I worry. I worry that humankind will find a way, somehow. We always have before."

"And so you play watchdog," Lanna said.

Jason stood for a moment. "The few, so cleans'd, to these abodes repair," he finally said in a quiet voice. "And breathe, in ample fields, the soft Elysian air. Then are they happy, when by length of time, The scurf is worn away of each committed crime; No speck is left of their habitual stains, But the pure ether of the soul remains."

"Homer?" Lanna asked.

"Virgil." Above, beyond the buildings, beyond the air, Jason could Sense the specks of starlight in the sky. "Space is Elysium, Lanna. The place where heroes go when they die. The Varvax and the others, they've fought and bled, just like we have. They finally overcame all of that—they paid their price and have earned their peace. I want to make certain their paradise remains such."

"By playing god?"

Jason fell silent. He didn't know how to reply, so he didn't. He simply stood, Sensing the paradise above and Evensong below.

Coln rifled through the in-room bar, searching for something to drink. He wasn't normally prone to drinking, but normally he wasn't facing the loss of his job and probable imprisonment. Eventually, he poured himself a small glass of scotch and made his way out onto the balcony.

He paused halfway out the door. Jason Write stood leaning on his own balcony just a short distance away. The man didn't look over, but Coln still felt as if he were being watched.

*Don't let him intimidate you,* Coln told himself. He turned away from Write indifferently and leaned against his own balcony railing.

Coming after Write had seemed like such a good idea at first. Coln had been frustrated at the Bureau's lack of information. They knew the PC was hiding technology from them, but they had no clue what it was. They knew Write had something integral to do with the PC's runnings, but they weren't sure why. They wanted to keep trailing him, but they'd made too many promises. The Bureau had been ready to just leave Write alone.

Coln sighed, taking a sip of his drink. He'd picked the wrong mission. Write planned to leave within the day, taking the unfortunate scientist with him. And then Coln would be left by himself, a fugitive and a fool.



"That kid is a fool," Lanna said.

"I know," Jason mumbled. "But at least he has passion. And courage."

"Not courage—brashness."

"Call it what you will," Jason said, Sensing the young UIB agent standing a short distance away.

"What's more," Lanna continued, "he may have passion, but that passion is hatred of you. I've been doing some searching. It appears that you were the focus of several of his research projects back when he was an undergraduate. None of his conclusions were flattering, old man. You should read some of these things. . . ."

Lanna continued to speak, but Jason's mind drifted. His thoughts kept coming back to Denise. Who had taken her, and what had they done?

*She didn't understand violence, Jason thought. She didn't understand violence, and she hadn't ever tasted salt. She spoke oddly, in a way that was almost familiar. She couldn't walk, or use her muscles. It was almost . . .*

Jason took in a sharp, surprised breath.

*Almost as if she were accustomed to another body.*

"What?" Lanna demanded.

"Denise Carlson is dead," he said.

"What! What happened to her?"

Jason was silent for a moment.

"Jason! What happened!"

Jason ignored her, turning and walking back into his room. He strode out into his hallway, then made his way to the room beside his own—not Coln's, but the one on the other side. He threw open the door, not bothering to knock.

Denise sat up with surprise, but relaxed when she realized who he was. Jason strode past her without saying a word, walking to her room's control panel. He entered a few commands, and the light in the room grew far brighter, the bulbs turning slightly red in color.

"How is that?" he asked, turning to her.

Denise regarded him with confusion. "It's nice. It feels right for some reason."

Jason nodded once. In his mind the light was a virtual roar.

"Please," Denise said, holding her hands forward. "Tell to me what you are doing." Her hands held forward—forward in the Varvax gesture of supplication. He should have seen it sooner.

"Jason, you're freaking me out," Lanna said in his ear.

"This isn't Denise Carlson," Jason said quietly.

"What? Who is it?"

"Its name is Vahnn," Jason explained.

Suddenly, Coln pushed his way into the room. He immediately shielded his eyes from the light—light that imitated a harsh, hot sun, one that required a strong crystalline carapace to provide protection.

"What are you doing, you maniac!" Coln said, pushing past Jason and altering the controls to the room. Then he turned to Denise. "Are you all right?"

"I . . ." Denise said. "Yes, why would I not be?"

Coln turned harsh eyes toward Jason. Then he paused, frowning.

"What?" Jason asked.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Write?" Coln demanded.

"Like what?"

Coln shivered. "Your eyes . . . it's like you're looking past me. Like . . ."

Jason reached unconsciously for his face, feeling for sunglasses that weren't there. He had forgotten he wasn't wearing them. He turned from the room in shame, rushing out into the hallway.

*I mustn't let him see—mustn't let him know. He'll mock me. He'll laugh . . .*

Coln stayed behind, watching with confusion as he knelt beside the creature that had the body of a woman and the mind of an alien.

"It's not possible," Lanna said.

"They said that about psionics years ago," Jason said, striding down a walkway outside the hotel.

"But, it's just so . . ."

"So what?"

Lanna sighed in frustration. "All right, let's assume you're correct. Who would do such a thing? Why switch someone's mind for an alien's? What good would it do them?"

"The Varvax are the most developed Cytonics in the galaxy," Jason said, speaking quietly as he passed people on Evensong's dark streets.

"So?"

"So," Jason said, "what could you learn if you could spend a few years in a Varvax's head? What if you could get into a Varvax body somehow and infiltrate their society? Someone tried to get ahold of a Varavax host—but something went wrong. The body they stole was killed, or perhaps the transfer went wrong. They disposed of the Varavax body afterward and left Denise wandering the streets."

"But why Denise?"

Jason paused. "I don't know. Maybe she was one of them—a spy of some sort. When a better opportunity came along, she took it."

"That's weak reasoning, old man."

"I know," Jason admitted. "But I can't think of anything else right now. All I know is that woman back in my room is not human. She acts like a Varvax, thinks like a Varvax, and gestures like a Varvax."

"She speaks English," Lanna pointed out.

"Many Varvax study English," Jason said. "Or, at least, understand it. They find spoken languages interesting. Besides, maybe her body retained a residual understanding of speech and motion."

"Maybe," Lanna said, sounding unconvinced. "Where are you going?"

"You'll see." Jason continued on his way for a short distance until he came to the mental hospital. He strode in, and the same nurse sat behind the desk. She raised an eyebrow at him, confused and a little disapproving.

Jason ignored her, striding into the facility itself.

"Sir!" she called. "You can't go in there! Sir, you don't have . . ." her voice trailed off, but soon she began calling for security.

"The nurse?" Lanna said, listening. "You're back at the hospital? So, you've finally admitted that you're insane and decided to commit yourself?"

Orderlies, nurses, and even some patients began to look into the hallway. *He'd better be here*, Jason thought. Just after the thought occurred to him, he sensed a familiar face peeking out of one of the rooms.

"Please alert the Evensong Police Department, Lanna," Jason said. "They're about to get a report of a madman attacking one of the orderlies in this hospital. Please tell them to ignore it."

"Jason, you are a very strange man."

Jason smiled, then spun and burst into the room. Several orderlies jumped back in surprise at Jason's entrance—the buzzing white room was some kind of employee lounge. The orderly, the one Jason had seen at the café, immediately turned to run. Jason jumped forward and snatched the man with one hand, then spun him around.

The man struggled, but a knee to the groin stopped that. Jason pulled off his glasses, then grabbed the man's head with both hands and turned it toward him.

"Who sent you?" Jason asked, staring at the man with his sightless eyes.

The man stared back defiantly.

"Ah, I see," Jason said, holding the man's head in both of his hands. "Yes, I can read your thoughts easily. Very interesting. Ah, and yes. So they switched minds, did they? I didn't know that was possible. Thank you, you've been very informative."

Jason released the man's surprised head.

Lanna snorted in his ear. "Jason, unless you've been hiding some strange powers for a very long time, that was the biggest load of lies I've ever heard."

"Yes," Jason said, replacing his glasses and striding out of the room. "But they don't know that."

"What's the point?" Lanna asked.

"Be patient," Jason chided, holding up his hands as security guards entered the hallway. "I was just leaving," he said, then pushed past them and left the hospital.

Back at the hotel, Jason gathered Denise and Coln in his room. One regarded him with customary wide-eyed confusion, the other with equally customary hostility. Jason removed his pin and handed it to Coln.

"There is a ship chartered for Jupiter Fourteen," Jason said. "Be on it when it leaves, and take Denise with you. Go to the PC office, and they will protect you from the Bureau."

"What about you, Write?" Coln asked suspiciously.

"If I'm right, I'll be going somewhere else in a bit. You should get moving—the ship leaves in less than an hour."

Coln frowned. Jason could sense the apprehension in his face. He didn't want to accept the PC's help, but he also didn't want to face the Bureau's justice. Hopefully, he would see to Denise's safety.

After a short internal debate, Coln nodded and stood. "I'll do it, Write. But first I want you to tell me something. Answer one question for me."

"What?"

"Do you have what everyone says you do?"

Jason frowned. "Have what?"

"FTL engines," Coln said. "Does the PC have the technology to create them or not? Have you been withholding the secret of FTL travel from the rest of humankind?"

Jason paused. "You're asking the wrong question," he finally said.

Coln's expression darkened. "I knew you wouldn't answer," he said, turning toward Denise's chair. "Come on, Denise."

Denise didn't move. She slumped in her chair, eyes closed.

"Denise!" Coln said urgently, kneeling beside her. She appeared to be breathing, but . . .

Jason began to feel light-headed, and he noticed a faint scent in the air. He cursed quietly, turning to dash across the room. He stumbled halfway to the door, losing his balance. He barely even felt himself hit the ground.

*They work fast. Must have already been prepared to gas us. . . .*

Jason awoke to blackness. Pure, horrifying blackness. There was no sight, no Sense, no feelings at all. The darkness had returned.

Jason began to shake. *No! It can't be! Where is my Sense!* He curled up, barely feeling the cold metallic floor beneath him. The blackness swallowed him—it was more than just a darkness, it was a nothingness. A lack of sensation. It was the one, true terror in Jason's life. And it had returned.

He whimpered despite himself, memories flooding in.

It had started with his night vision, as visual diseases often did. He remembered the nights spent in bed as a child, the darkness seeming to grow more and more oppressive. And then, it had started to come during the day. First his peripheral vision—it had seemed as though the darkness was following him, enveloping him. When he awoke each morning, the darkness seemed closer. It had crouched like a beast in the corner of his vision.

Terror. The doctors couldn't do anything. Jason had been forced to try to live his life as normal, the darkness seeming to grow closer every moment. He had lived in perpetual fear of what must come.

And then, there had been the children. The other children, who hadn't understood. He had tried to go on as normal, tried to live his life as if nothing was wrong. He should have admitted it to them. As it was, they only saw a stumbling fool. They had laughed. Oh, how they had laughed.

Jason screamed, as if yelling could push back the darkness. Where was his Sense? What was wrong? He flailed in the darkness, his fingers brushing a wall. He pulled back into a corner, frightened and confused.

"How did you do it?" a voice asked from above.

Jason looked up, but didn't see, or Sense, anything.

"Tell me, Mr. Write," the voice demanded. "Can you read minds? This is impossible of Cyto—even the Varvax cannot penetrate an individual's thoughts. How did you do it?"

Jason didn't respond. The darkness. The blackness.

*I did this on purpose, a piece of Jason's mind thought. I baited them. I*

wanted to get their attention, so they would bring me to them. They did. This is what I wanted.

But . . . the darkness.

"How!" Jason croaked. "How have you taken it away?"

"Answer my questions, Mr. Write," the voice said, "and I will return your Sense. How did you read that man's mind?"

Jason shuddered, pulling back against the cold telanium. The man's voice was harsh and guttural. He spoke oddly—with an accent of some sort, but not one that Jason recognized.

*It's not permanent, Jason told himself. The darkness will go away. Just like it did when you developed Cyto.*

"I am not a patient man, Mr. Write," the voice warned. "Speak, and I will let your companions live."

*Coln, Denise. They were in the room with me.*

Jason didn't answer. He sat, breathing deeply, struggling to remain sane. Ever since he had developed Cyto, he had never been in darkness. His Sense worked even when there was no light.

"Lanna?" Jason whispered, feeling the darkness advance on him. "Lanna!"

"The link to your home base has been cut, Mr. Write," the voice said.

Jason whimpered. The darkness seemed to be growing closer—closer to devouring his mind.

"As you wish, Mr. Write," the voice said. "I will give you three minutes. If you don't have an answer for me by then, the woman dies."

A click, then silence. It seemed worse without the voice—suddenly Jason wished he had kept the man talking. He wished he had told the voice the truth, that he couldn't read minds. Anything to keep someone else there.

Now he had no one.

*I can't do this! Jason thought. Anything but this. I lived this horror once, I can't do it again!*

He tried to push out with mindblades, but nothing happened.

*Be calm, Jason. Control yourself. The Varvax said something about this.* Sonn had said it once. He had been reserved and uncomfortable—odd for a Varvax. Jason had asked if there was a way to suppress Cytonic ability. Sonn had eventually admitted there was, but had told Jason he wouldn't need it. Not yet.

The darkness . . .

*No! Stay focused. You don't have time for fear.* There was probably a technological aspect to the suppressant device. Many Cytonic abilities had mechanical halves—like the FTL comm feed, which wouldn't work without physical receivers. The Cytonic behind his imprisonment would be feeding part of his mental energy into a physical device, one that used electricity to amplify the effect. But because of that augmentation, Jason would never be able to break free. He would be trapped forever in the blackness.

*Not forever. Just another few minutes, until they kill me.* That would almost be preferable.

An image came to him. An image of humankind escaping into space. An

image of human merchants cheating and trading, of human tyrants capturing the technologically inferior Varvax, Tenasi, and Hommar. Images of wars, of fighting, of a paradise destroyed.

*I can't let that happen!*

But what could he do? He felt along the wall, stumbling to his feet and feeling his way around the room. It was small, perhaps two meters square. He could barely feel the seal of the door—there wasn't a handle on his side.

*There's not enough time!* Jason thought with desperation. *I can't escape, I can't contact Lanna—*

He couldn't contact Lanna, but . . . he reached up to his ear, tapping at the control disk. They had broken his link to the home base, but perhaps they hadn't thought of stowaways. . . .

"You won't get away with this!" Coln screamed to the empty room. "I'm a UIB agent. There are serious repercussions for the imprisonment of a law enforcement officer!"

There was no answer. Coln sighed, his rage weakening before sheer boredom. He had awakened in this room, which appeared to be some sort of storage closet, with a headache. He hadn't heard a thing outside their door since that time. Denise was there too, sitting quietly on a box a short distance away.

*What is Write planning?* Coln thought. *He had us captured, but why?* It had to have something to do with the PC master plan, whatever that was.

Suddenly, a sound crackled in his ear. "Coln?" The voice crackled sickly—like whispers from the lips of a dead man.

"Write?" Coln asked. "Why did you imprison me!"

"Hush, Coln," the voice whispered. "We are both imprisoned. We are going to die unless you can do something."

"Something?" Coln asked suspiciously. "What?"

"You need to knock out the power. Blow a fuse, overload a circuit—do something."

Coln frowned. "What good will that do? They'll have backups."

"Just do it." The link crackled off.

Coln swore quietly. What was Write planning this time? Dare he trust the man? Dare he do otherwise?

Denise watched with confusion as Coln searched through the small room, pushing aside boxes and carts. Eventually, he found a power jack on the wall. He stood for a moment, regarding it. Finally, he sighed and loosed a piece of steel from a nearby box's constraint. *Why not? It's not like I can get into any more trouble.*

Jason couldn't escape the darkness. He couldn't shut his eyes against it, he couldn't run away from it, and he couldn't ignore it. He could only huddle against the wall, feeling his resolve—and his sanity—grow weaker by the second. He heard, but didn't understand, the voice when it returned. His captors had made a grave mistake. They could make all the demands they wanted, but he was in no condition to respond to them. They could kill him. It wouldn't matter.



The voice screamed at him. Jason felt his sanity slipping. He couldn't struggle against it. He didn't want to struggle against it. Struggling would be far too difficult. Blissful unconsciousness was the only answer—a silencing of thought and perception.

At that moment, his Sense returned.

It was only a blip—a fractional waver in the power level. But it was enough. Sense flooded into Jason like drugs into an addict's veins. It immediately began to fade, the suppressor coming back on line.

Jason blasted out a thousand mindblades at once, shredding the walls around him. He shattered the telanium into chunks, the chunks to chips, and the chips to dust. The walls dissolved like tissue paper before a nuclear blast, spraying grains of metal away from him. He screamed as he let out the surge of power, a bestial yell to push back the darkness.

The suppressor immediately fell dead, its mechanisms destroyed by the blast. Jason lay huddled, his suit stained with dirt and sweat, on a bright telanium floor. He reveled in his returned Sense for a wonderful, silent moment. However, with Sense came sanity—the two were inseparable to him.

*There is another Cytonic in here, and he's not going to be pleased that I've escaped.*

So, taking a deep breath, Jason forced himself to stand.

Coln sat, stunned. He held a piece of rubber in his hand—the very same he had used to grip the metal as he'd rammed it into the power jack. He had expected a slight reaction; he hadn't expected the room next to his own to explode.

Coln blinked, dusting the silvery telanium flakes off of his clothes. *What. . . ?* he thought with amazement, rubbing some of the telanium grains between his fingers. *What could have done this?* Modern weaponry had difficulty even scarring telanium.

He looked up, and saw Jason Write standing in the direct center of the explosion. The operative's suit was torn. Coln let the telanium dust trickle from his stunned fingers as he saw Write's eyes. Like before, they were unfocused, even unresponsive. They stared dully forward, motionless, like the eyes of . . . a blind man.

"What are you?" Coln whispered.

Write ignored the question. "Take the girl and go," he said, his voice calm but ominous. "This area is about to become very dangerous."

Coln nodded, reaching for the frightened Denise's hand. At that moment, a new voice spoke—one Coln didn't recognize.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Write," the voice said. "Must we stoop to such assumptions? Are we not . . . civilized?"

Write didn't turn toward the source of the sound—a speaker on the wall. "Show yourself."

There was silence. The sound of footsteps. Coln pushed Denise behind him, turning wary eyes on the hallway outside their rooms—the hallway that was now exposed, thanks to the strange explosion.

A figure appeared in the hallway. He was nondescript save for a long nose and a thin body. He wore a sharp navy suit, and he smiled as he strolled forward, scuffing the layer of telanium dust.

"Tell me who you are," Write said, turning to face the man with his unfocused eyes.

"Come, Jason," the man said. "Don't you recognize me?"

"No."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised," the man said, continuing to stroll around the room. "It has been several years, and I really wasn't all that important. Just one of your many recruits. My name was Edmund."

The room fell silent. "Why did you try to kill Coln?" Write finally asked.

Edmund just smiled. "Even for a PC agent, you're an extremely secretive man, Jason. You've been hiding things from the Varvax. If they knew that you could create mindblades, they'd certainly be tempted to elevate humankind's intelligence designation."

Write frowned. "It was a test. You wanted to see if I could stop the bullets."

"And I was not disappointed," Edmund said, stopping just in front of Write. "Mindblades are very advanced, Jason. Another few decades of study, and you might get FTL. I'm impressed."

The two men stood facing each other—yet neither one's eyes focused on his opponent. They remained like that for a tense few moments, and Coln frowned. He felt like something important was on the verge of happening, but it never occurred.

*What is going on?*

Jason fought for his life. Hundreds of mindblades whipped toward him, invisible blasts of pure thought. It was all he could do to keep them from shredding his flesh. He fought back, sending his own mindblades to block those of his opponent—an opponent he still didn't understand.

He vaguely remembered Edmund—though he hadn't known the face well enough that he had recognized it in the café. Edmund had been a man with some Cytonic potential. He had run away from the PC after just a few months of training. That had only been two years ago—how had he learned so much in such a short time?

The barrage of mindblades slackened, and Edmund stepped back. He was still smiling, but there was reservation in his eyes. He hadn't expected Jason to be as good as he was.

Jason breathed deeply. Coln was watching from a short distance away, his face confused—he hadn't been able to see the insane battle Jason had just fought.

"I'm impressed again, Jason," Edmund said.

Jason felt sweat trickle down his cheek.

"I wouldn't have expected you to know how to block mindblades," Edmund continued. "Few of us have even practiced that."

Jason stood stiffly. "I've been expecting this for some time," he whispered. "I knew I couldn't keep it away from people like you. I knew that someday I would have to fight."

"You prepared well."

The mindblades struck again. Jason grunted, whipping out with his own blades. There was a faint ripple to his Sense when a mindblade was about to appear, and he sliced at that area with his own blade. The blasts

canceled each other, wavering in his Sense like two curves of light. He blocked hundreds of them, the air around him shining like he was in the middle of an explosion.

*I can't keep this up long.* Eventually, a mindblade would break through. Jason had only one card to play—he would have to make it count.

Jason continued to fight, waiting for the right time. Edmund was better than Jason was. It shouldn't have been possible—Jason had been practicing Cyto longer than any other man. How could someone have overcome him so quickly? Jason had to find out. Otherwise, all he had worked for would be lost.

The attack retreated again. Edmund was perspiring now—at least it was difficult for him.

"You learned from the Varvax well," Jason said, gambling.

Edmund looked up with surprise. Then he laughed. "So you can't read minds after all," he said with a smile. "That was quite the bluff."

*I was wrong, Jason thought. But, how then. . . ?*

"Goodbye, Jason Write."

Jason felt the air waver around him. More mindblades than he could count began to form—it was like he was being circled in a dome of pure energy. He couldn't block them all. He would die.

*Now!*

Jason focused on himself. He didn't raise any mindblades. Instead, he Sensed inward. He felt his own vibration in his Sense, a cool black-clothed creature. So different than the boy he had once been. The boy had been stupefied, made immobile, by his horror.

Jason was no longer that boy. With a scream, he felt the mindblades descend around him, and he threw himself willingly into the darkness.

All was still.

The blackness enveloped him, the non-existence that had threatened him since childhood. Except this time he had come to it by choice. He suffocated for an eternal moment in its embrace.

Then he reappeared. As he reentered normal space, he pushed the air away, lest its molecules get trapped within his appearing body. In a similar manner, he pushed Edmund's flesh away from his hand.

The world shook, and Jason was back. He stood with arm extended directly in front of Edmund. Jason's wrist ended abruptly where it met Edmund's flesh—his hand had materialized inside of the man's chest.

Edmund's heart, gripped in Jason's fist, thumped once. Edmund's eyes stared ahead in shock. Behind, the place where Jason had been a moment earlier exploded with mindblades.

Jason squeezed once, and Edmund cried out in pain. The heart stopped beating. Edmund slid to his knees, and Jason pushed his hand slightly outside space and withdrew it.

Edmund fell backward, staring with surprised, agonized eyes. He didn't fall unconscious as he died—he was far too powerful a Cytonic for that. Instead, he just whispered.

"FTL transmission. Jason, you surprise me again. We had no idea. . . ."

Jason knelt beside the man. "I've had it for some time. Tell me. Tell me how you did it. Where did you learn such powers?"

The man laughed, a pained hacking laugh. "I've studied it all my life, Jason."

"How?" Jason demanded.

Somehow, Edmund met Jason's eyes. "Ah, you're such an idealist, Jason of the Phone Company. Sometime, you must ask yourself this. Why would a race such as the Varvax need to learn an ability such as Cytonic suppression?"

Jason paused, his mind growing numb. He only knew one answer, one he had barely dared consider. "To keep prisoners."

"Prisoners?" Edmund coughed. "Original thinkers! Dissenters! Anyone who doesn't agree with them."

"You lie!"

Edmund laughed, his back arching in pain. "And you will be our escape," he said, his voice growing loud until he was practically screaming. "They've had their paradise long enough. You nearly went mad after spending just a few minutes without your Sense—imagine living your life in such a box! You only see the peace, you only see the perfect society."

"You don't see the price!"

Edmund's final breath hissed out, and his body fell limp.

"You lie," Jason whispered. "They are a peaceful people. We are the monsters, not them. . . ." He sat for a moment, regarding the fallen body. Coln still stood a short distance away, looking amazed—and confused.

"Come here," Jason said quietly. "Bring the girl." Coln obeyed without a word. Jason put a hand on each of them, then he entered the darkness once again.

Coln recognized the room immediately. He blinked once, trying to forget about the awful sense of emptiness he had just experienced. He was in a white, curved room—the operations center of PC Headquarters. The room pictured in his fuzzy holo-vid. Coln had studied its image hundreds of times, and now he was actually there.

Except, PC Central Operations was on Earth, months away from Even-song. Coln breathed in with surprise. Write stood a short distance away, his suit tattered, blood seeping down his arms.

"You do have FTL travel!" Coln accused.

"Yes."

"Then I was right!" Coln said. "You've been keeping FTL travel from humankind!"

"Yes."

"Why?" Coln demanded. "What are you trying to protect us from?"

"I wasn't trying to protect *us*," Write said, walking over to the side of the room. He approached the wall—the one that was supposed to house the FTL communication machinery—and pulled a lever. A small cup popped out at the bottom, followed by a stream of steaming coffee. "I was trying to protect them. And prepare us."

"Prepare us?" Coln asked.

"The exchange programs," Write said. "The outreach programs—even the skin-color fad. Anything to make us more open minded. Of course, it doesn't really matter now, does it?"

Coln frowned, then eyed the coffee machine. "So, it's not the FTL comm unit . . ."

Write shook his head, then pointed to the side. A man, the man Coln had mistaken for a security guard in the holo-vid, sat a short distance away. The man had his eyes closed, and he sat quietly in a chair.

"His mind," Write said. "It powers all FTL calls."

"But," Coln said, "there are millions of them. . . ."

"All you need is one mind to provide the FTL capability," Jason explained. "Computers can do the actual routing."

Coln hissed quietly in surprise.

"Technology is limited," Jason said, "only the mind is infinite."

Further questions were forestalled as a door slammed open and a red-haired woman burst into the room. She immediately ran forward and grabbed Write in a powerful embrace.

"What happened!" she demanded, and Coln instantly recognized Lanna's voice.

"Coln," Write mumbled, "meet Lanna Write. My wife."

"What? Your *wife*?"

"Unfortunately," Write said. There was fondness in his voice.

"But," Coln objected. "The Bureau has bugged your communications dozens of times—you always complain when she's assigned to you!"

"Yes, and he does the assigning," Lanna said, checking the small wounds on his arms. "He always says that the less the Bureau knows about his personal life, the better. Besides, he can't help teasing me." She looked up at Write. "All right, sit down and tell me what's going on. The medic is on his way."

Write sighed, taking another sip of his drink. "I might have been wrong, Lanna."

"About what?"

"About everything," he said, his voice haunted.

Jason sat in his rooms, letting the medic bandage his arms. Lanna stood, dissatisfied, a short distance away. She was the terror of PC Central Operations—few men had the courage, or the stupidity, to incur her wrath.

"All right, old man," she said. "What happened?"

Jason shook his head. Before he could reply, his holo-vid beeped. Jason punched the button, and Sonn's chitinous face appeared.

"You have some explaining to do, Sonn," Jason said.

The Varvax put forward his hands in supplication. "I am at your disposal, Jason of the Phone Company."

Jason pushed a button, showing Sonn an image of Denise being questioned by PC operatives. "Tell me it's not true, Sonn," Jason pled quietly. "Tell me you don't lock your discontents away."

"Varvax discontents?" Lanna asked with surprise.

Sonn raised his hands, a sign of apology. "I said that you would discover the reason for Cytonic suppression eventually, Jason of the Phone Company."

Jason bowed his head. *No. It can't be. . .*

"It is the only way," Sonn said. "The way to have peace."

"Peace for those who agree with you," Jason spat.

"It is the only way."

"And the others?" Jason demanded. "The Tenasi, the Hallo?"

"The same," Sonn said. "They have discovered the way, as you will eventually. The way to Prime Intelligence. I must apologize for the inconvenience we have given to you."

Jason sat, stunned. He was wrong. All of these years, over a century of work, and he was wrong. They had deceived him. Suddenly, he felt sick—sick, and angry.

"They're going to come for you, Sonn," Jason said, nodding thankfully to the medic as he finished the bandaging. The man was trustworthy—one of the first Cytonics Jason had recruited over a hundred years before.

"Excuse me, Jason of the Phone Company?" Sonn asked after a short pause. His hands were pulled back in the Varvax sign of confusion.

The medic left and Lanna sat down beside Jason. She watched Sonn with calculating eyes—she had never liked the Varvax. She said she didn't like people who could so easily falsify their body language.

"The ambassador—the one who died," Jason said. "He was a discontent. I have him now. I thought humans were trying to infiltrate Varvax society; I didn't realize that it was the other way around. Your dissidents are escaping, and they're hiding amongst us. They're trying to get hold of human technology. We're still uncivilized, Sonn. We have some war machines that could blast down your ships without even pausing."

Sonn maintained his sign of confusion, then augmented it with one of worry. Few people knew that the Tenasi ambassadorial vessel that had been shot down over Earth had been one of the most advanced, most powerful ships in the galaxy. A single human missile had destroyed it. The other species had far inferior technology.

"This is disturbing," Sonn admitted.

"I know," Jason said. Then he reached over and cut the connection. Sonn's face fuzzed and disappeared.

Jason leaned back with a sigh, Sensing Lanna beside him. He'd known it was coming—he'd feared that he couldn't keep humankind out of space. He just hadn't expected heaven to fail him.

"I'm sorry," Lanna whispered.

Jason shook his head. "You always warned me that I was too idealistic."

"I wanted to believe you anyway," Lanna said. She slowly trailed her hand along his cheek. "Do you think the one who attacked you was the only one?"

"Not a chance," Jason said. "He was too confident."

"Then. . ."

Jason took a deep breath. "Prepare a press release, Lanna. Tell them that the Phone Company has finally developed faster-than-light travel, and that we will release it to the public as soon as the United Governments approves our patent."

Lanna nodded.

"Perhaps we can salvage something from paradise," Jason whispered. ○



Leslie What lives in Oregon, but would like to move to Barcelona. Her Jack Russell terrier stalks her like they're in some sort of horror movie. She teaches writing at UCLA Extension and writes stories, essays, and novels. Her newest short story collection, *Crazy Love*, published in July 2008 by Wordcraft of Oregon, received a *Publishers Weekly* starred review. Visit Whatworld at [www.lesliewhat.net](http://www.lesliewhat.net) for news and silly pictures. Her latest tale for us reveals some of the problems a person can have if . . .

# MONEY IS NO OBJECT

Leslie What

**H**er sister had laughed when the will revealed Alison had inherited the magic wallet. "So," she'd said. "You're rich. You pay for the funeral."

Alison had stared at Ellen, unable to ask why her older sister had given up the wallet without a fight.

They'd rushed off to the celebration of life, where hundreds of people had gathered, most of whom Alison could have sworn she'd never met. Everyone was drunk from the whiskey punch. A man holding an empty Tupperware bowl complained about having to wait for lunch.

The family was in the first group lining up for the buffet table: Alison and Jeff and their boys, Ellen and her husband. She worried there wasn't enough turkey to go around, so Alison chose roast beef. She watched her sister hoard two large frosted brownies between folded napkins. When Ellen transferred the brownies into her purse to make room for a turkey club, Alison saw the silver glint from their mother's iPod. "Hey," she said. "I was supposed to get that." They'd all agreed on this before her mother slipped into a coma. The iPod and the twelve dollar credit on iTunes were to go to Alison. Ellen was to get the frequent flier miles. They'd agreed. Alison turned to her husband Jeff and said, "It isn't fair."

"What did you say?" he asked. He was concentrating on a particularly skittish pickle. He speared at it four or five times before it stuck to his fork.

If ever she needed Jeff to multitask it was now. "It's not fair," she said. Their mother had specialized in pitting her daughters against one another.

Her husband reached for her hand. "There are worse things than having enough money," he said.

Alison stared at him and wondered where he'd been these last twenty years, that he could say such a thing and mean it. The burden of the magic wallet had defined her mother. She spent her life worrying someone would steal it. She got stuck paying the tab every time someone invited her out for drinks. Friends and family depended on it, coveted it, resented it. But you couldn't just give it away because the wallet made you feel that without it, you were nothing. Emptying the wallet was a full-time job.

As everyone was leaving, the lawyer patted his jacket and said, "If you don't mind, I'll give this to you now." He handed Alison the magic wallet.

Though she'd never held it before she knew exactly what was expected of her and exactly how to behave, like magic. She opened the wallet but he waved her off.

"No time," he said. "I'll send my bill in the mail."

The caterer, however, needed to pay her staff. She wiped her hands on her apron, and held them out as Alison plucked dollar bill after dollar bill after dollar bill from the magic wallet. The leather was smelly brown, with fingerprints and worn spots from being pried apart.

"I'm hoping to get home before next week," said the caterer, eyeing the thickening bundle.

"Sorry," Alison said. "It takes a while." She took out another dollar, and another, and another, and another until she had counted out three thousand. The wallet produced one dollar at a time. It would never be emptied, but you had to wait a second for it to refill. You could only pay for what you bought, not save for what you wanted. The process was slower than a dot-matrix printer. Her feet were swelling from the squeeze of pantyhose and dress shoes. If time was money, what good was a magic wallet now, when even a good cup of coffee, meaning a latte, cost \$3.75, plus tip?

"Well," Ellen said on her way out, "Great to see you all. Guess we'll talk again when Mom's house goes on the market." Ellen looked more relaxed than she had in years.

"Bye," Alison said. "Call me if you need anything."

"Oh, she will," said Ellen's husband, which was not at all reassuring.

There was nothing else to say. They had entered a new stage of life, one in which their roles were reversed and Ellen would no longer be "the responsible one."

"Do you mind if we stop by the BMW dealership on the way home?" Jeff asked.

"Of course I mind!" she said, ready to bite him. What was he thinking? Did he have no idea of how long it would take to count out forty-five thousand dollars? She did. Twelve and a half hours. She had watched her mother pay Ellen's medical school expenses, had heard her mother say she'd never do that again. And when it was Alison's turn, her mother had steered her to a one-year program as an animal health technician at Santa Ana College. Her mother had justified it all by reminding everyone of the hours it had taken to cover the bill for the complications resulting from Alison's Caesarean birth.

Her boys appeared out of nowhere and asked Alison for twenty dollars each to go paintballing. "No," she said. "Not right now."

"Why not?" they asked.

"Because," she said, but she knew they would press her until she caved, and she couldn't bear the fuss right here, right now. She opened the wallet to count out money into their open palms.

"Well," Jeff said. "Guess I'll quit my job."

He was right. She could pull his yearly salary in two eight-hour shifts. She'd quit her job at the animal hospital because no one could pay her as much as she could pay herself, but she'd miss some of the work, some of the people, and all of the dogs and cats.

They left the hall and headed to the car to drive home.

In the back seat the boys grew tired of fondling their money and began to argue. "I'm gonna make you eat paint," said the oldest. "I'll gog you," said the little one. "In your dreams," retorted his brother. They paintballed on opposite teams and by the end of every game, the younger boy was in tears. It was an unfair match. The little one burst into tears now, as if resigned to his fate.

"Where do you want to stop for dinner?" Jeff asked.

"Hard Rock. Hard Rock," the boys chanted. They would never again want to go anywhere without a gift shop.

The magic wallet had been given to her mother by an aunt angry after not being invited to the baby's christening. At first the family had viewed it as a gift and not the curse that it was meant to be. Now it belonged to Alison. She decided to treat herself to a massage the next morning. Her husband was smiling, dreaming, no doubt, of Patek Phillipe watches and a bottle of the Macallan sixty-year-old single malt. The children took turns punching each other and stealing one another's money. Alison saw their lives unfold; the childhood bickering that would escalate until the day something as thin as a wallet with a one-dollar bill came between them. ○

## RETURN OF ZOMBIE TEEN ANGST

In the halls, she won't even say Hi.  
She doesn't even know I'm not alive.

— Mike Allen



# **DHULUMA NO MORE**

**Gord Sellar**

Although the idea had been taking form for a long time, Gord Sellar tells us this story “kind of gelled while I was staring down into the Northern Pacific—I don’t think it was quite the Arctic Ocean at the time—on a flight from Seattle to my home in Korea. I was born in Malawi, but my family left when I was a toddler and I’ve never been back to that country. I grew up hearing stories about that continent, however. I guess that’s why Africa is almost completely offstage here—that’s how it’s always been to me; very important to the world but far away, neglected, mostly imagined or photographed by people passing through, or recounted in stories. Especially terrorist stories! The chaos of decolonization that my father witnessed all around him, of resource scrambles and coups and frightening governments suddenly seizing power, reminded me of the future I’ve imagined here. From what I’ve read, the effect of global dimming—which is the principle used in the climatech in this story—seems to be real. I get the feeling that whatever technologies we implement to deal with global warming in the next decade or two may have downsides, and if they do, I wouldn’t be surprised if the brunt of those difficulties was expected to be borne by the developing world.”

**W**hat I wanted was to catch the slate-grey of the ocean, and the pale, forlorn bergs floating in it—to capture that coldness and distance that haunted everyone here, but especially the Mozambicans. But the gentle pinks and oranges of the toner-choked sunrise kept growing, deepening,

and I couldn't drive it out. They were ruinously stunning, those rich hues brought out by all the gunk pumped into the atmosphere. It was the kind of scene amateur photographers had been snapping every sunrise and sunset since the first big stacks had gone online. Useless to me. I was still fiddling with the bugcam settings, jumping from one feed to the next, when Ngunu found me.

"Beautiful, isn't it, Mister Illingsford?" he said. With that accent of his, I couldn't tell whether he was aiming for sarcasm.

"Yeah, but we don't *want* beautiful," I said, without removing my cam goggles. I left a couple of the nearby cams running, in case he said anything interesting. "We want the grey and cold. It's a psychological effect. Pretty landscape lessens people's empathy. They'll think, what's so bad about Africans having to floecomb here?" I gestured east toward the Greenland coast, its majestic glacial cliffs, imposing bergs floating in the foreground. "*That's beautiful*, they'll think when they look at that. People won't see dying glaciers, just white majesty."

"White majesty," he echoed with an ironic laugh, and handed me a plastic mug of coffee. Black. No sugar, I figured. Bitter, a little burned, probably.

"Thanks," I said, and sipped it. I was right.

I sipped a little more, watched the brightly colored tugs all around hurrying after bergs, slowly chugging them off to some hydrotanker. Around us, parka-clad Africans hurried about the deck of Ngunu's tug, yelling to one another in Portuguese and Kiswahili.

"How'd you and your men get into ice salvage, Ngunu?" I *tried* not to sound too impatient. It wasn't just my curiosity. Making a documentary is storytelling, and I had only a vague idea of what story I'd been hired to tell.

Ngunu just smiled and said, "What do you mean? I bought a permit, my friend, that's all. It's good business . . . there aren't many good businesses open to people like us." It was a non-answer, and he knew it.

I caught myself searching his face for those other, long-ago faces of his. The shell-shocked kid, an abandoned child soldier who'd been found in a ditch and brought to the clinic cot in the Lichinga refugee camp. That was the face I remembered best, the one I'd snapped a shot of, that had ended up on the cover of *Time*. My most famous photograph, and probably the reason he'd offered me this gig. It'd turned eleven-year-old Ngunu into the whole world's raging guilt trip for almost a week.

Or the angry young man I'd seen on the CNN-World webcast in Singapore, with his fierce, intense eyes staring out of the hotel's wall-size display at me, cajoling his fellow Mozambicans to rise up and crush the government man, the natural gas and deep-oil miners, the Chinese and American and European mosquitoes sucking Mozambique's blood away. *We must rise up, my brothers, be men and smash them!* How I'd squeezed Laura's hand when I heard him, and said, *Oh my god, that's the kid . . . my Time cover!*

I saw traces of those other Ngunus, but he was so much older. Calmer, quieter. *Where has your rage gone*, I foolishly wondered.

"You know what I mean," I said, shaking my head. "You were a general at twenty! You've got powerful friends. You could be president of Mozam-

bique someday if you want. So why are you salvaging ice with these . . . kids?"

Ngunu exhaled a thick draught of steam and closed his eyes for a moment. Without opening them, he said, "President? Of what? Have you seen what's left of my country these days? It hasn't rained in eleven years. Anyway, what good are presidents?" He opened his eyes wide, intense. I was glad I'd left my cams running. "They get to skim a little money, for a while, but they always have to die. *Bang*, one night. Heart attack. It's never *really* a heart attack, though. *Bang!*" Ngunu said, slamming his hand onto the railing of the tug, and he looked across the sea to the west. "Me, when I die, it will be for something worthwhile." Then he smiled.

"Okay," I said, and decided to change the subject. "So, what are we doing now? Looking for a big berg?"

"Today?" Ngunu said, staring off at the other busy tugs. "No. There's something happening, big, up north. Today, we will go north."

The men were wary—each refused to give me a tour belowdecks—but a few of them were friendly enough. One old trick of the trade helped: I'd lock the controls, and get someone else to wear my cam goggles during the interview. That way, they relaxed enough for me coax decent interviews out of a couple of them, the ones who spoke English.

Rafael Lokondo, especially. He was first mate, a close friend of Ngunu's from way back, and his story had been downright moving. I realized during his interview that, if I could just get the right archival footage—buy, bribe, whatever it took—this documentary might even have a shot at being award-worthy.

Not that awards would make the world *care*. A lifetime of making award-worthy reports on one bloody mess after another had taught me that people don't even get shocked anymore. They'd see the documentary, or download it, at least. Crowds would clap at some festival or other, comment like mad on the website, some popstar would start a foundation, and a couple of newspaper reports might get written on poor floecombers. Then they'd all go on with their lives.

Hell, I would go on with my life, too, after I finished it, so how could I blame them? And there was Laura's voice in my head, clear as a klaxon, what she said to me that night in Jaipur, in the shadow of A.C.T.'s half-built dimmer stack, the city full of billboards with their pie-in-the-sky promises in several languages advertising how the toner from the stack—"a blend of hypoallergenic, specially designed particulate matter tuned to the needs of the local climate"—was going to save our broiling world. And I realized, there on that tub of Ngunu's, that Laura was still right. I had to do what I was doing now. What else could I do?

I shoved Laura's sad eyes out of my mind, along with the eerie pale-pink walls of the city, and forced my thoughts back to the problem of figuring out how to make the world give a shit about Ngunu's men, their families, their lake, their shattered world. Who would care about a few black Africans on a gigantic tugboat salvaging icebergs off the coast of Greenland? People had mortgages. Their alternative-fuel stocks were pogo-sticking up and down as new climatech companies were diving



headfirst into the market. China was playing tough guy again. Anyway, *everyone* loves a toner-choked sunset. How can anything so beautiful be bad? And the emissions *were* helping to slow down warming, at least in the Northern hemisphere. Hell, too few people were even allergic to the stuff for anyone, even governments, to muster much objection.

I watched Lokondo smoking a quick cigarette with a couple of crewmen, their hoods pulled back so they could see one another's faces. The world would look at them and say, *That's not a plight, that's a job*. People who flew to the other side of the Earth once a month for meetings or conferences would think they knew what it felt like to be far from everything they loved. But they wouldn't. They wouldn't know the cold, the bob of the tug, the endless, uncrossable distance.

Could I *make* them feel that? Landscape, maybe, I thought, looking out to sea. The murky, toner-dimmed sky hung above, faint clouds a grimy off-white. Greenland was just a distant white strip on the eastern horizon. To the west, the distant, gloomy silhouette of an offshore mining rig hunched down against the sea. Closer by, an enormous berg drifted slowly out to sea to melt, like a forgotten country drifting off the map, with only the tug chasing behind to connect it to the world.

But that wouldn't be enough. Scenery wouldn't make people really care. Perhaps nothing would, I half-thought, just as a loud voice suddenly exploded from the ship's loudspeakers, barking crackly Portuguese. Ngunu's voice. The men hurried belowdecks, their order and discipline astonishing.

"What's going on?" I asked when Lokondo rushed past, wondering whether we were about to hit the berg.

"Go to Ngunu!" Lokondo shouted, pointing toward the captain's compartment before rushing off in the other direction. I tore through my cam goggles' interface menus, visually tagging random crewmen and sending cams flittering after them as they disappeared belowdecks. I sent a few more beetlecams crawling toward the tug's outer hull, and then rushed to Ngunu's boxy console compartment, almost joyful. Finally, *something* was happening.

"Brace yourself," Ngunu shouted as I arrived at the control room. He'd said it into the ship's comm, in Portuguese, but between covering water wars in Mozambique and the rainforest coca insurgencies in Brazil, that was one of the Portuguese phrases I'd learned to react to without thinking. I opened my mouth to ask what was going on, but I never got a chance.

The explosion came almost immediately, with a massive spray of water, steam, and flames bursting from the side of the tug, and the sweet gassy stink of boiling methanol curdled the air. Smoke poured up from the tug's starboard hull, and shouts rang out belowdecks.

Ngunu screamed desperately into his radio: "Requesting help! Help us! We have men here! No lifeboat! Permission to dock? Please! Over!"

I wondered what dock he could mean, for just a moment, and then realized the moment was an audience sympathy goldmine. This demanded conscious camerawork. I cycled through cam views in my left goggle,

keeping my right eye on the running capture of Ngunu as best I could. But what I saw in the left goggle distracted me. The men belowdecks were still yelling, but the scene was far from chaotic. Down in the smoky cargo holds, most of the men stood calm, lined up in their work uniforms, bags on their shoulders, unpacking crates.

They were stuffing guns—big guns—into their shoulder bags, and had that steely look I recognized from the faces of children and men about to rush into battle. The same look I'd seen on Ngunu's face on TV years ago, demanding a revolution.

Ngunu must have seen the shock on my face, in my staring eyes.

"I'm sorry, but our regulations are . . ." a monotone voice said over the radio.

Ngunu began yelling again as he tapped the touchscreen piloting interface. The tug changed course for the huge mining rig I'd glimpsed earlier, no longer so distant. The red logo for the A.C.T. Corporation grew visible, vivid against the grey of the rig's walls, the grey of the sea and sky.

When Ngunu finally turned to face me, I didn't get to say much. "You . . ."

"This is an emergency!" he hollered into the radio with a slight shake of his head. "Please! Help us!" he yelled. But he kept those calm, blazing eyes of his steady on mine, even as the cloud of black smoke thickened behind him.

His gaze did not soften during the long silence that followed. He saw the questions in my eyes, but he did not answer them. He just watched me, listening, the radio mic in his hand.

Finally, the guy in the rig responded. "Permission granted," the poor bastard said.

As the tug pulled up close to the dock, a crowd of parka-clad rig workers leaped on board, even before the tug's robotic clamps had fastened to the submerged docking rings.

"Where is everyone?" one hollered.

"Belowdecks!" Ngunu hollered. "Fighting the fire!"

"Fire crew number one, get on it!" the same man yelled, and several others, hauling fire extinguisher backpacks with big red A.C.T. logos on the back, rushed down into the lower decks.

Heaven help me, I knew those men were going to die. But I didn't say anything. I just looked at Ngunu and he grabbed my arm. The force was crushing.

"Trust me," he whispered into my ear. "This is the story of a lifetime."

An old reporter once told me that when someone promises you the story of a lifetime, you should refuse it, no questions asked. The story of a lifetime is almost always a horror, he said, reporting it taints you. Sometimes even just seeing it.

I watched the fire crew die in my left goggle. They scrambled down the halls, leaping over the occasional crewman they found collapsed on the floor or coughing. One of my bug cams flitted after them, all the way to the fire. They began spraying containment gel on the flames when suddenly, a door slammed behind them. Two of the three stopped spraying. One of them managed to turn to try to see what was happening.

Not one of them saw the grenade before it exploded.

Ngunu's men used air-powered guns so quiet that I only heard them through the audio feeds from my cams. Within minutes, all of the men from the rig were either dead or squirming like worms, gagged and bound in plastic cuffs on the floors of the tug's hallways.

I stood there, waiting. Terrified. Jumpcutting feeds from one bug cam to another was all that kept me calm.

Jump. Static was all that streamed back from the burnt cam in the grenaded room. Jump.

Lokondo hurried down the tug's inner hallways with two of his men, kicking prisoners in the ribs and asking whether they had sub-clearance.

*Kick, Kick, Kick.* They shook their heads, over and over, *No, No, No.*

*Kick. Yes.*

"Great!" Lokondo said. The prisoner flinched. "We need you!" The African grabbed him by the shoulders and, with a little help from another of Ngunu's soldiers, hauled the man to his feet. He was tall, a blond Scandinavian, arms bound behind his back.

Defiant, scowling. "I won't help you," he growled.

"Fine," Lokondo said. "Your choice." Then he raised a pistol to the man's head.

"Security choppers are on the way," the blond snapped. "They'll be here in ten minutes, and . . ."

"Yes, yes, good," Lokondo said, gagging the man again and shoving him toward the stairs to the main deck.

Jump. A view of the deck from above, a man standing behind another man, reaching gently toward him.

And then there was a hand on my shoulder, and I realized I was seeing myself. The hand didn't move. I turned to find Ngunu.

"Are you recording, brother?" he asked quietly. I nodded, trying to hide my nervousness. Ngunu was a different man than the one I'd set sail with that morning. I couldn't help but both fear and admire his guts.

Ngunu smiled. "Good," he said. "This is a very big day. Today, history will change forever, my friend." He nodded out to the waves, for me to look.

An enormous form was surfacing, like Leviathan from the depths. After a moment I realized that it was a submarine. I focused my goggles' direct cams and a couple of hull-hugging crawler cams onto it, and zoomed.

Through the streaks of water trickling back into the ocean shone the bright red A.C.T. logo, same as on the rig. The sub turned slowly and drifted toward the deck, and the impression was somehow ghostly. The Lurking Dutchman. Still recording, I switched my left goggle cam view back belowdecks.

Jump. Lokondo hunched behind the blond man. Behind them a couple of crewmen crouched silently. Further down the hall, a group of men were hauling up a wooden crate a couple of meters long. A drab ray of sunlight shone down onto Lokondo's dark, angry face, and he whispered to his men a single word:

"Wait."

\* \* \*

It took less than a minute.

Once the sub's ramp clanged down across the gap and onto the dock, the hatch hissed open. A couple of muttering, rumpled-suited young men—just assistants—emerged bearing briefcases and computer gear. They picked their way across the ramp to the dock, staring in obvious disgust at the flaming tug.

Ngunu leaped from the tug to the dock, and hurried past them, pistol in hand. They yelped and flinched backward. When I hurried up onto the dock after him, they dropped their equipment and retreated to the rig facility's main entrance, staring at me with terror in their eyes.

By then, Ngunu had been spotted. He was scrambling for the hatch, which was about to snap shut again. He caught it with his free hand, and fought to keep it open. Roaring from the strain, he glanced back at me with wild eyes.

"Help me!" he yelled. It was the voice of a man who knew what it was to see death, to fail, to lose everything. A haunted man.

I did. Whether it was panic, or hope, or perhaps it was sympathy, I don't know. Maybe it was all of them at once. As I ran over, I thought, Oh my god I'm going to go to prison for this. Yet there they were, my hands, clinging to the lip of the hatch, dragging it up. There was my voice, shouting, drowned out by an awful, familiar shriek. It was a sonic weapon. I felt bile rising in my throat, my guts going watery. I fought to hold on longer.

Didn't have to. Ngunu gritted his teeth, rammed his pistol through the crack in the hatchway, and began shooting.

The hatch swung suddenly open, hard, and knocked me back on my ass. There I stayed, in shock, not even bothering to jumpcut through different cam views. Ngunu's men—many now in army fatigues, with cheap Singaporean automatics cradled in their arms, grenades sprouting from bandoliers like a harvest of deadly fruit—poured along the dock and onto the sub, straight into the open hatchway. Even running, they seemed so . . . orderly. Passing with his blond, gagged prisoner at gunpoint, Lokondo smiled and nodded.

Ngunu beamed at me. Then I realized that I'd crossed over from filmmaker to accomplice. Terrorist. Criminal. He thanked me sincerely, before yelling past me in Portuguese. I followed his gaze, for a moment. A trio of his men were on the dock, tearing open the long crate.

The shooting inside the sub continued for many long seconds, followed by a chorus of screams and yells. I switched my left goggle to the cam flittering above the tug, and saw myself sitting there, staring dumbfounded at the open hatch, as the last of Ngunu's foot soldiers rushed through it. On the dock, the men had affixed electromagnetic clamps of some kind to the sub's hull, and were hauling something long and heavy from the crate. It was riveting, Ngunu standing there: calm, powerful, commanding his soldiers. The shot was brilliant. My confidence surged. Whatever else happened, this was going to be a *hell* of a documentary . . . if I lived long enough to make it.

"Inside," Ngunu yelled at me, the gun still in his hand. Heaven help me, I did as I was told.

\* \* \*

"Now, now, my friends! The hull is fine!" Ngunu hollered at the chattering, terrified men and women. "We are using rubber bullets. We're not as stupid as you think, ah?"

They were a mess, these terrified suits, crouched on the floor, hands on their heads and mascara smudged. Tears and sweat ran down their faces. Shock-eyed and stunned. Their broken phones and smashed net gadgets were piled in one corner. Ten enormous security thugs lay slumped on the luxurious red carpeting. Some were bound and gagged, others dead. I sent cameras flitting and crawling about the cabin, scanning each and every face. A few were vaguely familiar: rich, famous climatech people. Europeans, mostly.

"Mister Føllesdal," Ngunu proclaimed, as if welcoming an old acquaintance. "Please get up."

The suits turned, staring at an older, bald-headed man crouching among them, and something clicked in my head. Halvor Føllesdal: the CEO of A.C.T., the world's largest climate control tech venture. The inventor of the dimming stacks, clogger of the skies. When Føllesdal didn't move, one of Ngunu's men stepped in among the crowd and hauled him to his feet.

"Please," he begged. "I don't know what you want . . ."

"Of course not, Mister Føllesdal," Ngunu snapped. "That's why we're here today, to tell you." Ngunu laughed, and the other soldiers chuckled, too. This terrified the suits even more, men with guns laughing. Another chorus of whimpers followed. "We want the monsoons back," Ngunu said over the noise.

"The . . . the monsoons?"

"Yes," Ngunu said slowly, as if to a mentally handicapped child. "The mon-soons. You've heard of them? Big rains? Oh, yes, you don't have monsoons in Norway, right?"

"I . . ." Føllesdal faltered. "I don't understand."

Something thumped loudly against the hull, and everyone there realized the same thing: security had arrived. Hope flashed across Føllesdal's face.

"Take us down!" Ngunu shouted, and the command was relayed out into the hall by one of the men. "Now!" he added, loudly enough that no relay seemed necessary. Almost immediately, I felt that slightly odd sensation of sinking. The suits were shivering and weeping again, and Føllesdal slumped forward.

"How did you know we were taking this tour *today*?" a horrified woman in a black pantsuit asked. She sounded German, and I would have sworn she was some politician I'd seen before.

Ngunu ignored her. "Let's go, Føllesdal. We have some questions for you." Then he nodded at me and said, softly, "Come along, brother. Time to earn your paycheck."

"I've never heard of this Agrebi fellow," Føllesdal said, shaking his sweaty, shiny-pated head.

Ngunu faked his surprise badly. "Really? Tunisian scientist. Lady. Not a fellow. Used to work for you. You sued her and . . ."

"A.C.T.'s a big company. Many people used to work for me." He coughed,

looked at one of my cameras, and added, "But anyway, she's wrong. There's not a shred of evidence that the sunlight filtering achieved with our toner emissions has any effect on patterns of precipitation, but we know that it *has* achieved a significant contribution to stemming the tide of global warming that threatens us all!" He sounded like he was rattling off ad copy, evasive and nervous. It was bizarre, maybe a stress reaction, but great footage. "Now, if you'll . . ."

"The more you lie and change the subject, the more dogshit my cameraman has to cut," Ngunu snapped, his face radiating photogenic rage, broken and defiant all at once. I watched rapt through my goggles. "Everyone knows about the link between your toner stacks and drought. Dimming the sun is fine, it slows down the warming, but you killed the monsoons. *Ev-e-ry-one* knows that. . . ."

"That's not proven," Føllesdal insisted. "The evidence is too scanty and controversial—"

"Then *why* did you cancel the stack projects in Australia?" Ngunu shouted the word "why" so harshly that even manic Føllesdal flinched. "And *why* did the monsoons stop completely after the big stacks in Spain and France and Morocco were finished?"

"You can't blame that on . . ."

"*Agrebi* says it's the toner. That it gets into the clouds, and reacts with the water. Bleeds out more aerosols and gases that cause the water to condense differently. So it rains less often. So you can keep the clouds big and reflective, especially with the 'local blends' coming from the stacks south of the equator. She showed me studies. Many studies, and computer models." Ngunu said. "She's a *scientist*."

"We have scientists, too," Føllesdal grumbled.

Before Ngunu could snap at him, I said, "Yes. In your pocket. Half of them are the same bastards who worked for Big Oil thirty years ago. Nobody trusts them, and you know it."

Føllesdal frowned hard, clearing his throat to speak. I didn't let him. "As far as the majority of the scientific community is concerned," I said, "The toner stacks have brought drought to Africa, isn't that so?"

"That's a baseless overstatement. . . ." Føllesdal said.

Ngunu lifted his pistol, aiming it at the CEO's heart, and ground his teeth. Føllesdal eyed the gun, and raised his hands a little. "Uh, yes, some scientists think that."

"*Some?*" Ngunu cleared his throat, tensing the hand holding the gun very slightly. I zoomed in carefully on Føllesdal's face, to keep the gun out of the videos. "Hands down. Quit lying," Ngunu said, moving the gun closer to Føllesdal's chest.

I almost smiled then. After all those years, looking for a way to make businessmen quit lying and admit the truth—and here it was, really so very simple. I almost wished I'd thought of it before.

Føllesdal frowned and lowered his hands. "Okay, many respected scientists blame it on our stacks. But others say it's mostly the atmospheric salting pumped out by Sodian International, or AeroClimact's stratospheric gassing program. We're not the only company working in the dimming industry! We're competing with dozens of . . ."



A soft click. The safety on Ngunu's pistol.

Føllesdal nodded. "But yes, there may be *some* evidence of possible significant undesirable side-effects apparently caused by the particulate emitted by our toner stacks." Føllesdal sighed dramatically. "Look, no solution's perfect. I don't see you Africans giving up fossil fuel-based industrialization. What are *we* supposed to do? There's a price for saving the world. . . ."

"Where is this world you saved?" Ngunu said, lowering his gun. "When I was a little boy, we had schools in my country. I went to a school built for us for free by a Chinese oil company. We asked our teacher whether the toner stacks would save us. He said yes, of course. Told us to *pray* for you. Now we don't even have a country left. We have millions dead."

Ngunu leaned forward, his voice suddenly quiet, focused as the point of a needle as he spoke. "I can *see* them, right now, looking at me, asking me, *When will the rain they promised finally come?* You said the rain would come again next year. Or the year after. It's been thirteen years now. Lake Niassa is gone. *Gone*. The fish are gone. What *fucking* world have you saved? All you bastards have given us is *dhuluma*. Do you even know what that word means, *dhuluma*?" Ngunu asked, his whole body tense, barely containing what he felt.

Rage. I realized it was surging through me too. I'd forgotten how it felt: to want to strangle a man with his tie, or beat his head against a wall and roar at him. I couldn't remember what *dhuluma* meant, but I wanted to crush Føllesdal's throat over it.

"It's Swahili. It means *injustice*," Ngunu snapped, and then went silent. I recognized the word, suddenly: it had come into widespread political use when I'd been in East Africa during the freshwater wars.

Anxiously, I asked Føllesdal, "Assuming A.C.T.'s Eurasian and North American stacks *are* shown to be responsible for the droughts in Africa and Latin America, what is the company going to do for the affected countries?"

Føllesdal swallowed quietly. "I need to discuss that with our legal advisors before . . ." he said.

"Come on. *If* it's your fault, what are you willing to do?"

The gun jabbed deeper into Føllesdal's chest.

"I suppose," he said, "We would clean it up. But that will never be proven."

Ngunu cleared his throat, and raised the pistol again, drawing back one fist. "He's right. Even though it's true, we'll never have enough proof. But that doesn't matter. We've got another solution."

He hesitated for a moment, and then turned to me and said, "Cameras off."

When I nodded that they were off, he slammed the grip of his gun into the man's face.

"What the hell is this?" I asked as my reactivated cams wandered around us.

Lokondo laughed. "This is how the other half lives," he said, gesturing at the plush red carpet, the Rembrandt and Picasso and Warhol on the

walls, the wide couches. A huge video screen covered one wall, beside a full bar. "You mean you don't have one, boss?" he added, grinning. He and Ngunu laughed.

"What are we *doing* down here, Ngunu?" I asked.

He looked at me funny.

"We are not doing anything," he said, gesturing to me. "But *we*," he said, indicating Lokondo and himself, "are going to shut down the toner stacks . . . by killing the Gulf Stream."

The archived footage shows my typical brilliance: "Huh?"

To Lokondo's surly blond hostage, who was piloting the sub, Ngunu said, "Bring up the cameras."

The huge videoscreen flickered alive with a view of the murky, dark ocean floor. Amid huge seabed plants, an enormous robot worm inched along through the muck, suddenly stopping and burrowing into the sediment. The sub drifted above the muddy cloud it had kicked up.

"These are A.C.T.'s methane clathrate mining fields," Ngunu explained, glancing at his cell phone briefly. To the blond man he said, "Stop! This is the spot."

The blond prisoner scowled at Lokondo while Ngunu punched more keys on his phone, but did as he was told and stopped the sub. I turned my attention back to the viewscreen in time to see something large and white briefly flash by, sinking past the sub's viewcam. The camera followed the movement.

A small warhead was sticking into the muck, nose-first.

More brilliance from me: "What the hell?"

"No, no," Ngunu said. "The question you must ask me is, 'How are you going to kill the Gulf Stream?' Then I can tell you how a nuclear blast will liberate all this methane. What the tsunami will do to the Greenland glaciers. How the sudden melt will kill the Gulf Stream, and make them shut down the—"

I nearly choked. "But . . . you can't kill the Gulf Stream!"

"Why not? If they don't mind killing the monsoons . . ."

I shook my head. "I mean you *can't* do it, physically. *One* nuke?"

Ngunu laughed. "This is the biggest deposit of frozen methane ever found. Plus who knows how much pure gas is underneath. This stuff is amazing, Illingsford! Do you know how much it can outgas? But no, our bomb isn't the only one: just the first. We have friends who are contributing. They're ready to help crack up the Greenland ice. Easy as that. One phone call is all it will take."

I felt sick. "Friends? Who?"

"Many, many people want it to rain again, brother. People who don't mind if Europe's covered in ice for a while."

"What?" I yelped, my horror clear. "Wait, Ngunu, just—your people have the moral high ground right now. And what Føllesdal said . . . If you just let me make the documentary . . ."

"Nobody will care," Ngunu grumbled. "You know that."

I leaned on a chair. The room swam before me, and once again I thought of Laura, our last night together in Jaipur. Her sorrowful face in the choked-off sunlight, light dimmed already by toner from stacks half a

continent away, at that time of day when the rose hues of sunset turned the pink-painted buildings ominously bone-white. How she'd answered my question so simply, so quietly: that she *had to* do the work. That she couldn't go and live in an exurb of Toronto and pretend that the world wasn't falling to pieces, have kids and host dinner parties and ignore the wars and plagues and the broiling, rainless lands burning under the sun, their orphans clutching guns, screaming and running.

*But what am I supposed to do?* I'd asked her.

*Keep telling people the truth. What else can you do?*

What else? I looked up on the big screen at the missile in the seabed, at the Chinese script snaking along its side.

"Maybe it won't kill the Gulf Stream," I said.

Ngunu nodded. "Yes, but maybe it will. Some people say it *might* work. And if it does, Agrebi, and Saluz, and Mkeze, and other scientists, they all say the rains will come back."

"And everyone in Europe will freeze to death."

"They can come to Africa. For a fee. Help fix the mess they made."

I nodded. How could I criticize? "But . . . what if it doesn't work?" I sat down at a coffee table, dizziness worsening.

Ngunu shrugged. "What can we do but try?"

"So you don't mind being the same as Føllesdal?" I tensed, asking that question, but my instinct had led there. Ngunu's eyes narrowed as he searched carefully for a way to say yes without equating his own brutal calculations to his enemy's.

"Talk to me," I said after a moment, not wanting whatever well-crafted excuse he would formulate. "Maybe there's another way. One that doesn't require so much more *dhuluma*."

Ngunu looked at Lokondo, fear on his face, and in his eyes I could see the other faces staring at him: everyone he'd ever loved, everyone he'd ever known. Children who would have played on the shores of Lake Niassa, and grown up to farm fish in those waters, who'd become soldiers instead. Old men who should have been sitting around, drinking Tusker lagers and telling big stories, but had thirsted to death by the roadside instead. His mother, tears on her dry cheeks. The dry bed of Lake Niassa. The gunfire, the dust storms. His father's blind eyes. All his dead brothers' whispering voices.

"Just talk to me," I said. "Please. We have footage of Føllesdal admitting fault. There are new laws up on the books now, ecological harm regulations, corporate liability. I think we can force A.C.T. to rehabilitate Lake Niassa, to restimulate the monsoons. Maybe we've *already* won."

And there he stood, gun in his hand, looking at me with those eyes. The same eyes I'd photographed in that clinic so many years before. Afraid. Angry. Tired.

He exhaled slowly. "What good can talking do?" he said. But he sat down at the table in front of me.

I smiled with relief—I almost laughed for joy, thanking Laura silently—and checked my cameras.

To this day, I don't know what happened then, except somehow, I knew exactly what to say next. ○

# THE ENGLISH MUTINY

Ian R. MacLeod

After a break from writing short fiction for a few years, Ian R. MacLeod has recently produced several shorter works. His novella "The Hob Carpet" appeared in this past June's *Asimov's*, and he has another piece due out in the steampunk anthology *Extraordinary Engines*. Ian lives in the river town of Bewdley in England, and tells us that he's currently working on a couple of new novels. The author says the main idea for his latest story's alternate history premise comes from William Dalrymple's book, *White Mughals*, which he thoroughly recommends. Ian maintains a personal website at [www.ianrmacleod.com](http://www.ianrmacleod.com).

I was there. I was fucking there.

I know that's what they say, all of us English anyway, and half the rest of the Empire besides. The fact that people think they can make that claim—tell anyone who'll listen to them how they survived the atrocities and sieges—is supposed to be evidence enough. But I was. I was *there*. Right at the beginning, and way, way earlier than that. I knew Private Sepoy Second Class Johnny Sponson of the Devonshires long before that name meant anything. *More* than knew the guy, the bastard, the sadhu holy monster, the saint—whatever you want to call him. I loved him. I hated him. He saved my fucking life.

Me? I was just a soldier, a squaddie, another sepoy of the Mughal Empire. I really didn't count. Davey Whittings, Sir, Sahib, and where do you want that latrine dug? Always was—just like my dad and his dad before him. All took the Resident's rupee and gave their blood. No real sense of what we were, other than targets for enemy cannon. Stand up and salute or drop down and die. Nobody much cared what the difference was, either, least of all us.

But Johnny Sponson was different. Johnny came out of nowhere with stories you wouldn't believe and a way of talking that sounded like he was forever taking the piss. In a way, he was. In a way, he was shitting us

all with his tall good looks and his la di da. But he was also deadly earnest.

This was at the start of the Scottish campaign. One of them anyway—rebellious bastards that the Scots are, I know there's been a lot. Never really saw that much of Johnny at first as we marched north through England. But I knew there was this new guy with us who liked the look of his reflection and the sound of his voice. Could hear him sometimes as I lay trying to get some sleep. Holding forth.

But no—no . . . Already, I'm getting this wrong. The way I'm describing Johnny Sponson, someone like him would never have got as far as being torn apart by Scottish guns. He'd have copped it long before in a parade ground misfire with some sepoy—oops, sorry Sarge, silly me—leaning the wrong way on his musket. Or maybe a garrote in the night. Anything, really, just to shut the loudmouthed fucker up. But with Johnny, there was always something extra—a tale beyond the tale he was spinning or some new scam to make the half-blood NCOs look like even bigger cunts than they already were. Even then, even before the revolt, mutiny, freedom war, whatever you want to call it, Johnny simply didn't give the tiniest fuck about all the usual military bullshit. He was an original. He was a one-off.

Johnny might have been just a private, a sepoy, lowest of the low, but he'd grown up as Lord-in-waiting on one of the last English estates. Learned to read and fight and fence and dance and talk there, and do all the other things he could do so much better than the rest of us combined. Even I was listening to Johnny's stories by the time we crossed Hadrian's Wall. We all were. And the place he was describing that he'd come from didn't sound much like the England I knew. There were no factories or hovels or beggars. I pictured it as a world of magic—like so-called Mother India or heaven, but somehow different and better still. The landscapes were softer, the skies less huge. I saw green lawns and cozy rooms filled with golden warmth, and the whole thing felt real to me the way things only can when you're marching toward battle and your back aches and your feet hurt. It was a fine place, was Johnny's estate, and all of it was taken from him because some Indian vakil lawyer came up with a scrap of ancient paper that disproved the Sponson family title.

The way Johnny told his story, it span on like those northern roads we had to march. He used words we'd never heard. Words like *right* and *liberty* and *nation*. Words like *reversion*, which was how the Mughal Empire had swallowed up so much of England when the country was rightly ours. Bankrupted, disinherited, thrown out on the streets, Johnny had had no choice but to sign up for the Resident's rupee like the rest of us. And so here he was, marching north behind the elephants with the rest of us Devonshires to fight the savage bloody Scots.

Never seen such mountains before. Never felt such cold. The Scottish peasants, they live in slum hovels that would make a sorry dump like York or Bristol seem lovely as Hyderabad. They reek of burned dung. The women came to our camps at night, offering to let us fuck them for half a loaf of bread. They'd let you do it, as well, before they slipped a dagger into your ribs and scarpered off with the bread. Can't even remember

how I got hit exactly. We were on this high, wind-bitten road. Elephants pulling the ordnance ahead. Then a whoosh. Then absolute silence, and I was staring at a pool of my own steaming guts. It seemed easy, just to lie there on the frozen road. I mean, what the hell difference did it make? Private Davey Whittings, second class. Snap your heels, stand up straight lad, salute the flag of Empire and pay good attention to the cleanliness of your gun. Death or glory, just like my dad always used to say before beating me for something I hadn't done.

But the voice I heard was Private Johnny Sponson's, not my dad's at all. My dad's been dead these last fifteen years, and I hope the bastard didn't give the vultures too much bellyache. But I was raving about him—and how my dear mum had then done the decent thing and walked into a furnace—as Johnny pushed my insides back where they belonged, then lifted me up and tied me to what was left of a wagon. Then, seeing as all the elephants were dead and the bullocks were all shot to mincemeat, he started to haul me himself back along that windy road for . . . I really don't know how many days, how many miles.

At the end of it, there was this military hospital. I already knew all about military fucking hospitals. If you wanted to live, you avoided such places like the plague. If you wanted to die, it was far better to die on a battlefield. Without Johnny Sponson there, I wouldn't have stood a chance. The whole place was freezing. Wet tents in a lake of mud. Got me through, though, Johnny did. Found me enough blankets to stop me freezing solid. Changed the dressings on my wound, nagged the nurses to give me some of the half-decent food they otherwise saved for themselves. Bastard saved my fucking life. So in a way I was the first of Johnny Sponson's famous miracles, least as far as I know. But Christ wasn't there, and neither was Mohammed or Shakti. Johnny wasn't some ghost or saint or angel like the way you'd hear some people talk. It was just him, and he was just being Johnny, and filling my head with his Johnny Sponson stories. Which was more than enough.

Told me how half the platoon had got killed or injured in that Scottish bombardment. Told me how he'd fluked his way around the cannonfire in the same way he'd fluked his way around most things. Then he'd seen me lying there with half of me insides out and decided I could do with some help. Suppose he could have saved someone else—someone with a far better chance of living than I ever had. Why me? All the time I knew him, I never thought to ask.

Johnny told me many things. How, for example, little England had once been a power to be reckoned with in the world. How this guy called William Hawkins had once sailed all the way around the Horn of Africa to India back in the days when the Mughal Empire didn't even cover all of India let alone Europe, and no one had even dreamed of the Egyptian Canal. How Hawkins arrived in pomp at the court of Jehangir. How, the way things had been back then, he'd been an emissary from equal kingdoms. No, *more* than that, because Hawkins had sailed from England to India, and not the other way around. After that, there'd been trade, of course. Spices and silks, mainly, from India—with English wool and the sort of cheap gewgaws we were already getting so good at manufacturing



in return. The stuff became hugely fashionable, so Johnny assured me, which always helps.

So there we were, the English and the Mughals, equal partners, and safely half a world away from each other, and between us lay the Portuguese, who were traveling and trading as well. Then something changed. I was still half in and out of my fever, but I remember Johnny shaking his head. Like, for just this once, he didn't know the answer. *Something*, he kept saying, as if he couldn't figure what. Of course, these were difficult times, the sort the priests will still tell you about—when it snowed in England one sunless August and the starving ate the dead, and the Mughals expanded across India looking for food and supplies—looking for allies, as well. They could have turned to England, I suppose. That was what Johnny said, anyway. But the Mughals turned to Portugal instead. A great armada was formed, and we English were defeated, and the Mughal Empire expanded all that way to the northerly fringes of Europe. I know, I know—I remember Johnny clapping his hands and laughing and shaking his head. Bloody ridiculous—England and India united by an Empire, which has since pushed south and west across France and Spain and Prussia, and east from India across all the lands of Araby. Half the world taken as if in some fit of forgetfulness, and who the hell knows why . . .

So I recovered in that hospital with a scar on my belly and a strange new way of looking at things. Sometimes, it sounded to me as if Johnny was just talking to himself. In a way, I think he was. Practicing what he wanted to say in those famous speeches that came not long after. He certainly had a way of talking, did Johnny. So much of the truth's lost now, but Johnny really *was* an educated man. He'd say the words of writers written years ago in English, of all languages—instead of proper Persian or Hindi or Arabic—as if they were fresh as baked bread.

There was this Shakes-something, and I thought at first Johnny meant an Arab prince. I can even remember some. *If it is a sin to covert honor, then I am the most offending soul*. That was one of them. Learned from his tutors, who taught him about the old ways of England in that fine estate before the Mughals took it away from him like the greedy bloodsucking bastards they are. Not that Johnny would put it so bluntly, but I learned that from him as well—how it wasn't as simple as the Indians being in charge and us English being the servants, the sepoys, the ones who worked the mines and choked on our own blood to keep their palaces warm.

Death. Guns. Spit and blood and polish. How to use a bayonet in the daylight of battle and a garrote in the dark. That was all I knew before Johnny Sponson came along. I was never that much of a drinker, or a chancer, or a gambler of any kind. Don't stand out—that was the only thing I'd ever learned from my dear departed dad, bastard that he was. I spent most of what little spare time I had, and even littler spare thought, on wandering around whatever place I happened to be billeted. Liked to look up at the buildings and over the bridges and stand outside the temples, just studying the scene. Watch the sadhu beggars with their ash-smeared bodies, their thin ribs and twisted and amputated limbs. I was

fascinated by the things they did, the way they adorned and painted what was left of themselves, affixed it with hooks and nails and bamboo pins. But what struck me most was the contrast—the beauty of their aspiration to be one with God, and the ugliness of what you actually saw. And the ways they smiled and rocked and moaned and screamed—was that pain, or was it ecstasy? I never really understood.

Those of us Devonshires considered alive enough to be worth saving were put on board this ship which was to take us to our next posting in London. The winter weather was kind to us on that journey south. The cold winds pushed us easily and the sea was smooth, and the sailors were good at turning a blind eye in the way that sailors generally are. We sepoys lay out there on the deck underneath the stars with the sconces burning, and we talked and we danced and we drank. And Johnny, being Johnny, talked and drank and danced most of all.

You remember what that time before the mutiny was like—you remember the rumors? The plans to extend the term of service for us sepoys from fifteen to twenty years? That, and the forced conversion to Islam? Not that we cared much about any kind of religion, but the business of circumcision—that got us as angry as you'd expect. It just needed *something* . . . I remember Johnny saying exactly that as I leaned with him looking out at the ship's white backwash and the wheeling gulls—how the Indians would be nothing without us English, how the whole of their Empire would collapse if someone finally pulled out just one tiniest bit like a house of cards . . .

There was a lot of other stuff as well. Hopes and plans. What we'd do come the day. And Johnny seemed at the center of it, to me at least. But where all those rumors came from, whether they were his or someone else's or arose in several different places all at once, I really couldn't tell. But that whole idea that England was waiting for Johnny Sponson—like the people knew him already, or had invented him like something magical in their hour of need . . . I can't tell you that that was true. But there are many kinds of lies—that's one thing that being around Johnny Sponson taught me. And maybe the lie that there were whole regiments of sepoys just waiting for the appearance of something that had the size and shape and sheer fucking balls of Johnny Sponson . . . Well, maybe that's the closest lie there is to the truth.

So we ended up down in London, and were billeted in Whitehall barracks, and the air was already full of trouble even before that spring began. Everywhere now, there was talk. So much of it that even the officers—who mostly couldn't speak a word of English to save their lives, as many of them would soon come to regret—caught on. The restrictions, the rules, the regimental bullshit, got ever stupider—and that was saying a lot. The whole wretched city was under curfew, but Johnny and I still got out over the barracks walls. There used to be these bars in London then, down by Charing Cross—the sort where women and men could dance with each other, and you could buy a proper drink. Illegal dives, of course. The sweat dripped down the walls, and there was worse on the floor. But that wasn't the point. The point was just to be there—your head filled up with pipe smoke and cheering and music loud enough to make your ears ring.

And afterwards when the booze and the dancing and maybe a few of the girls had finally worn everyone out, Johnny and I and the rest of us sepoys would stagger back through London's curfew darkness. I remember the last time we got out was the night before the Muharram parade when the mutiny began, and how Johnny danced the way even he had never danced before. Tabletops and bar-tops and crashed-over benches held no obstacle—there was already a wildness in his eyes. As if he already knew. And perhaps he did. After all, he was Johnny Sponson.

Johnny and I rolled arm in arm late that night along the ghats beside the Thames. And still he talked. He was saying how the Moslem Mughals were so nice and accommodating to the Hindus, and how the Hindus took everything they could in return. Something about an officer class and a merchant class, and the two getting on with each other nicely, the deal being that every other religion got treated like dogshit as a result. Like the Jews, for example. Or the Romanies. Even the Catholic Portuguese, who'd had centuries to regret helping conquer England for the Mughals. Or us Protestant Christians here in England—although anyone rich enough to afford it turns to Mecca or buys themselves into a caste. Why, Johnny, he could take me along this river, right within these city walls, and show me what was once supposed to have been a great new cathedral—a place called Saint Paul's. A half-built ruin, it was, even though it was started before the Mughals invaded more than two hundred years ago.

I remember how he disentangled himself from my arm and wavered over to a wall in that elegant way he still managed when he was drunk. The guy even *pissed* with a flourish! Never stopped talking, as well. About how this wall was part of something called the English Repository, where much of what used to belong to the lost English kings—the stuff, anyway, that hasn't been melted down and shipped back to India—had been left to rot. Thrones and robes. Great works of literature, too. Shakespeare, Chaucer—men no one in England has heard of now . . . Nobody came here, except a few mad scholars looking for a hint of English exoticism to spice up their dreary poems. That, and another kind of trade . . . Johnny was still pissing as he talked. "I believe the mollies frequent the darker aisles. Their customers call them repository girls . . ." Finally, he hitched himself up, turned around and gave me the wink. "I believe they're quite reasonable. You should try them, Davey."

We wandered on. But, as any soldier will tell you, it's a whole lot easier to get out of barracks than it is to get back in, and Johnny and I were spotted by the sentries just as we were hanging our arses over the top of the wall. Which is how we ended up on punishment duty on next day's famous parade, and perhaps why everything else that happened came about.

It started out as a fine late winter's morning. People seem to forget that. Muharram, it was, and I remember thinking that this whole pestilential city seemed almost beautiful for once as we troops were mustered beside the Thames at dawn. Even the rancid river looked like velvet. And on it was passing all the traffic of Empire. Red-sailed tugs, and rowboats and barges. I remember how this naval aeopile came pluming by, the huge sphere of its engine turning, and how the sky flickered like spiderwebs with the lines of all the kites, and me thinking that, despite all

Johnny said, perhaps this Empire which I'd spent my whole life defending wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Then the parade began. You know how the Indians love a bit of pomp, especially on holy days. And us Devonshires were there to celebrate the great victory we were supposed to have won against the savage Scots. Whatever, it was another fucking parade, and soon the clear skies darkened and it started sleeting, although I suppose it must still have looked some sight just like it always does. Elephants ploughing up Whitehall with those great howdahs swaying on their backs. Nautch girls casting flowers, and the dripping umbrella lines and prayer flags of the crowds who'd quit their sweatshops in Holborn, Clerkenwell, and Chelsea for the day. The shining domes of balconies of the Resident's Palace along Downing Street. And camels and oxen and stallions and bagpipes and sitars.

Johnny and I had been given these long-handled shovels. It was our job to follow a cart behind the elephants and scrape up and toss their shit onto the back of it. Punishment duty, like I said, and we were lucky not to have got something a whole lot worse. But the crowd thought it was fucking hilarious—sheer bloody music hall, the way we slipped and slid, and I guess that Johnny's dignity was hurt, and he was tired and he was hung-over as well, and maybe that was just one last hurt too many in a life full of hurts.

There a was guy in the crowd who thought me and Johnny scrabbling and falling in the sleet and shit in our best uniforms was even funnier than everyone else. He kept pushing on through the crowds so he could point and laugh some more. I hardly noticed, but Johnny gave this sudden roar and lunged toward him, waving his shit-caked shovel like it was a halberd. Not sure that he actually meant to hit anyone, but he *was* mad, and people started falling over and shouting just to get out of his way, and that spooked the elephants, and the next thing I knew a wave of chaos was spreading along the parade.

Soon, guns were firing. You could tell they were Indian repeaters rather than the slow old muskets that was all us sepoys were trusted with. It didn't feel like a parade any longer—more like some kind of battle, which is the one thing we sepoys know something about. The elephants' bellowing and rampaging added to the chaos. I remember how the whole side of this great gold-crusted temple just crumbled when one lunged into it. I remember the way it fell apart, and how the bibis and the priests inside came screaming out, and the freezing English sleet just kept on pouring down. Fucking beautiful, it was.

London was in uproar, and I managed pretty well that day with just my bayonet and my shovel, even if I say so myself. Of course, there was bloodshed, but there was far less than anyone expected, or the tales would have you believe. The Indians—the so-called loyal troops, the camel regiments out of Hyderabad and all the cavalry—they just fired and fell back beyond the city walls. London didn't burn that day—although the temple monkeys got it, and of course the tigers in Hyde Park and anything else that didn't look English. Like I say, there had been rumors of an uprising, and most of the higher caste Indians and the rich merchants and the Resident and all of his staff had left London days or weeks before. The city just fell into our hands.

We were like kids, rampaging after years of being kept locked up. The shops and warehouses were gutted, of course, and so were all the bungalows of Chelsea and the temples of Whitehall and the palaces of Whitechapel. It was like an army of ants at work in a kitchen, only people were carrying these huge sideboards and settees instead of grains of rice. Everything was spilling out of doors, and we were all dancing and laughing, and most of our gunshots were aimed in the air. Sepoy or Londoner, half-blood or English—on that first day of the uprising it really didn't matter. We were all on the same side.

Didn't see much of Johnny for a while—got myself lost in the cheering crowds. When I did find him it was already late in the afternoon. It was no surprise that the crowds were cheering most loudly around him—waving bits of curtain rod and billhooks and scythes, beating stolen temple drums. This was outside the great temple of Ganesh at Whitefriars, and I suppose most of its treasures must already have been looted, and its priests killed, and there was Johnny clambering high on the tower to speak to us all.

I won't bore you with most of what Johnny said. You either know it already or you don't care, and you can still get the pamphlets the censors haven't destroyed if you know who to tip the wink. It was just . . . Well, for me, it was simply Johnny being Johnny. Going on the way he always did, only now he had a bigger audience. And some already knew he was the guy who had swung that first shovel that got the whole mutiny started, and the rest would have believed anything he said by then. That day, we all wanted to believe. The stuff he was saying as he clung to the lotus blossom carvings on that tower, to me it was all typical Johnny Sponson—and it was still sleeting, and the stones must have been slippery, and he'd have killed himself if he fell. Stuff about how, contrary to most outward appearances, London *was* a great city, and this whole country was great as well. Not some province of Empire, no, but England, England, in its own right! And he mentioned all the names I'd often heard—names that the other sepoys and the rest of London were soon chanting as well. Elizabeth! Arthur! King Henry the Something! No, no, he was telling us, this shouldn't be the temple of Ganesh. If it was anyone's temple, it should be the temple of Christ, for Christ was an Englishman, and so was God. And if the Indians thought we were rats, well, then we'd make it the temple of Karair Matr, the rat goddess, and we'd swarm all over them and eat out their eyes. . . ! Once Johnny got going, there was nothing could make him stop, and we were all cheering and no one wanted him to. London was some place to be, on that first great day of the English Mutiny.

I found Johnny again some time later down by Three Cranes when it was fully dark. By then, people had lit many fires—after all, it was freezing and they needed to keep warm. The city glittered with broken things. It looked like a box of spilled jewels. And those who had gathered around him had already sorted themselves in the way that people who sense where power lies always do. Already, he was giving out orders, and all of London was taking them. I had to job to get to him as he sat by this huge bonfire on the padded bench of a broken palanquin surrounded by body-

guards. Nearly got knifed in the process, until Johnny saw who it was and shouted for them to let me through.

"Well, Davey," he said. "Something *has* happened. Birnam Wood has moved, perhaps. Or Hampstead Heath, perhaps . . ." It was still his old way of talking, and I could tell from his eyes that he was long past being drunk.

"What happens now?"

He smiled at the fire. "That's up to us, isn't it? They that have the power to hurt, and will do none, they rightly do inherit heaven's graces."

Despite the flames, I felt myself going cold. Already, I was starting to hate such nonsense, and all the bloodshed and destruction that I already feared would follow. We've all suffered one way or another, I suppose, Indian and English, no matter what side we took in that mutiny or revolt. The odd thing to me is how little us sepoys, who know as much as anyone about battle, didn't see how it was bound to turn out. Thought we could just march out across England, that everything would fall to us as easily as London did on that first marvelous day.

It even seemed that it was going to happen that way—at least for a while. We got news from Chester about a revolt that had started there several days earlier, and how all the non-English in the city had been slaughtered, which helped explain why the Indian troops in London had been so edgy, and quick to pull out. News from Bath and Derby, as well. Not that I'm much at reading maps, but Johnny used to study them endlessly as his rebel regiments fanned out from London to mop up what then seemed like the flimsy Indian resistance. It really was like dominos or falling cards or some unstoppable tide—all of the fancy descriptions Johnny liked to use when he climbed high on that tower of that temple of Ganesh to speak to us all.

It's a lie to say we didn't have a plan. We were soldiers, we were disciplined—we knew how to fight, and we knew that this whole land was rightly ours. Of course, we needed supplies, and of course we took them, but that's no more than any army does. And as for the other things—well, armies do tend to do some of those, as well. It comes with the trade. But the rumors of bonfires being made of all the raped and mutilated bodies—that's just Indian talk. Bodies don't burn that easily in any case. And Johnny, he never wanted those things to happen, and he flew into towering rages when they did. And all the time the red of Empire was changing on his maps to English green, just as the English winter was warming to spring. We'd hear that yet another town had overthrown its oppressors, or another battalion or whole regiment that had gone over to the rightful English side. Seemed like just a matter of time before this whole country was ours. Seemed like it wouldn't be long before we heard news that the Resident himself had peacefully surrendered to the Zenana Guard who protected his women, and then we could put away our bayonets and guns and garrotes. And after that . . . After that, everything would be the same as it was before, only better.

But Johnny's dreams were bigger, and we needed those as well. We needed *him*. It's an odd thing, I suppose, that we were happy to kowtow to a high-caste omrah like Johnny Sponson when we were so busy despoil-



ing the estates his likes had come from. But that was how it was, and it was something Johnny played up to. Set himself up in old Saint James Place, he did. Said the place could be defended, if push ever came to shove. Didn't exactly sit on a throne—he was always too busy pacing about and giving orders—but there was certainly a throne in the great hall in which he'd established his command, and its walls and floors were covered with beautiful rugs and many other fine things that had been looted from the Indian palaces across London. Every time he climbed that gold-encrusted tower of the Great Temple of Ganesh, he climbed a little bit higher, and the clothes he wore were that much grander. He fanned his arms out to all the thousands who waited below him, and this red velvet robe set with jewels and gold encrustations spread out around him in the wind.

I might have been Johnny's oldest and best friend, but in most ways I was still nothing special. Had no appetite for giving out orders, for a start—got too much of that from my bastard dad, and all the bullshit NCOs I've served under since. Anyway, there were plenty of others that did. In the new England we thought we were creating, that was one thing that hadn't changed one little bit—people were still telling other people what to do. Still, Johnny looked out for me, just as he always had. I passed messages. I listened. He asked me to be his eyes and ears.

I talked to people. Regiments that had arrived fresh at the capital, or ones that were returning bloodied and exhausted from some campaign. I didn't speak to those who were setting themselves up as captains and majors and generals—even wearing the sashes and badges of the men they'd tortured and killed, they were, by then—but to men like myself, ordinary sepoys, common soldiers, who still had to fight for their lives just like they'd always fought. And they spoke freely. They had no idea that I was any different to them.

That way, and using what I suppose you'd call my soldier's intuition, I started to get a picture of what was happening across England. Sometimes, it seemed to me that I understood things far better than Johnny's generals, or how they were drawn on his precious maps. The Indians and their loyal regiments had retreated, that was for certain, but they hadn't vanished. They'd mostly drawn back into the major cities we sepoys had laid siege to but still hadn't mustered the forces to attack. They were skulking in the huge new fortresses at Dover, for example, and hiding in the castles and ramparts surrounding Liverpool, Portsmouth, and Bristol, which had all been recently enlarged. Basically, the way I saw it, the bastard Indians had made sure they kept control of the main ports apart from London, which they'd given up because they knew its walls were too old to properly defend. Kept, as well, the power of their navy, both merchant and marine, which—uncaring shits that sailors are—had remained loyal to them. For me, it seemed as if the Indians had anticipated our mutiny far better than we sepoys. I even heard about the ships and reinforcements coming from Portugal long before the story was believed.

At first Johnny listened to what I told him, but soon, being Johnny, he listened less and less, and talked more and more. Lord Johnny Sponson of all England just laughed and danced across his plundered carpets and

around his gilded logpiles of half-ruined furniture in his great and echoing halls. Johnny did all the things he'd always been good at, and all his new friends and commanders—and mistresses—agreed and applauded and laughed and danced as well. The women, of course, were mad for him. For the ease of his limbs, and who he was, and what he could do for them. And if that look in his eyes, the way he smiled, wasn't quite the same as the Johnny I remembered, who the hell was there but me to care or notice?

Spring turned to summer, and the Indians with all their new supplies and fresh foreign troops pushed out from their fortresses. They defeated us at Bewdley and Oxford. They moved back across the Severn and the Thames. The weather turned hot, and food grew short because most of the farms in the area around London where we rebel sepoys were now pinned had been abandoned and no one had thought to harvest the crops. The Indian armies had the repeating rifles that they'd never allowed us sepoys to use. They had proper cannon instead of our antique ceremonial relics. They had fresh elephants, and armored aeropiles to plough along the captured rivers, and barrels of terrible Greek Fire. Their victories weren't so much defeats as routs—organized destruction, and the revenge they made upon all the thousands of sepoys they captured was terrible. They tied our bodies to their new guns and blasted them to pieces because they thought that we Christian English feared for our souls if we weren't given a proper burial. They pierced us with hooks. They burned us on slow fires of charcoal. They fed us, half-roasted but still alive, to the crows.

It was late August by the time London was fully encircled, and the great sepoy army that Lord Johnny had drawn around him had gathered within its feeble walls. The place was hot and overcrowded. The sewers were shattered. The river stank. The wells had turned. Yet there was still hope. There was still dancing. The severed heads of freshly discovered collaborators and Indians were regularly borne along the streets while the Indian generals waited outside the city walls.

I remember I was wandering one morning in the strange place London had become. The temples were emptied, the buildings and bridges were torn. There were no sadhus now, no beggars—or we were all sadhus and beggars. It was hard to tell. A smog of burning hung over the city. It darkened the sky. It shaded out the sun. The streets seemed strangely paved in that odd twilight. I pushed through drifts of sheet music. My boots crunched on the shattered brass shells of pocketwatches looted from a store. Stooping to look at them more closely, I saw there were even a few broken scraps of gold. I remembered walking—it seemed, not so long ago—arm in arm with Johnny close to this same place as we headed back from that bar at Charing Cross. There was no beer now. There was scarcely any water. But ahead of me, although now daubed with fresh layers of slogans, was the wall of the English Repository against which Johnny had pissed.

A movement caught my eye. This city was no longer safe—my hand went straight to my bayonet—but what I saw was a female figure, smallish and seemingly youngish, dressed in a brocaded red sari. The figure beckoned. Although I had no idea what she wanted, I followed.

The entrance to the English Repository had once been grand. Filthy statues that I suppose had once been supposed to represent art, or love, leaned around its collapsing arch. It was dark outside that day, but inside the darkness was far greater. The sort of dark you get that piles up over ages from shadows and mildew and things long left to rot. A few mutton-fat candles smoked, and I could see it was just as Johnny had said. Old stuff, once kingly and grand, but now so ruined as to have been ignored even by the rampaging mobs, was piled everywhere. Rain-leaked ceremonial carriages. Beds like the bloated corpses you saw down by the river, their upholstery green and swollen. And books everywhere. Not just on shelves, but piled on the floors and spilling their leaves amid the puddles. It was a damp place, even in the middle of summer. Reeked of piss, as well. The English Repository would barely have smoldered when all the rest of London had burned.

The woman in the glittering, once-beautiful sari was still shuffling ahead of me. Beckoning me on, and talking all the while in this cracked voice—saying words that made no sense, but also sounded familiar. Something about the rags of time, and love knowing no season—nonsense really, but pretty, bookish nonsense of a kind I knew only too well. I understood what she was by now, and I saw as we entered some kind of courtyard filled with the dead remains of furniture and rusting suits of armor that there were many others of her kind. They looked like crows—roosting there, and cackling as well. Repository girls, Johnny had called them. What a strange and desolate place to live, I thought—but I let the woman pull me to her, even though she stank as sourly as the city itself.

She was fumbling beneath my trews with black crow fingers. And I could see the rotting spines of the books amid the mushroom shelves behind. Could even read the same names that Johnny had once said to me. Shakes-something. And Chancer—Chaucer? Donne—Dun, Donny, is that how you'd say it? Somebody called Marlow. All the old Johnny bullshit. At least, that was how it seemed to me. And beyond that, leaning against a mossy wall with dead bits of vine growing over it and half the paint peeled and blistered off, there was this huge old painting of some lost great English estate. You could tell that it no longer existed. You could tell that it came from an England that had been plundered and destroyed long ago. I pulled away from the woman and threw the scraps of gold I'd picked up outside that looted shop as I fled to stop her following—although, like everything else in this city, it was worthless. She was shouting after me about how she had a son, a nice boy, for sale as well.

London had stirred itself while I was in the English Repository's darkness. The streets were suddenly rived with people. They were smashing what hadn't already been destroyed. They were chanting and wailing and pulling at their clothes. Guns were firing into the air—a waste of precious shot. I feared that the Indians had already breached our walls. But I know what a battle feels like, and I realized that this wasn't one, although there was so much noise and confusion that it took me some time to find out what had really happened. Even then, I still didn't believe it. Johnny Sponson, Lord Protector of all of England, had been out walking this very morning, keeping up morale, touching the ill and the wounded

who clamored to be cured, showing his face to the adoring crowds. I'm sure he thought he was well-protected, but the Indians must have positioned snipers close enough for one of them to pick him out. After all, he'd have made an obvious target, dressed as he now dressed. I grabbed arms and shouted into faces. Was he alive? Was he dead? No one seemed to know for sure.

I pushed on toward Saint James's Palace. Just like everyone else. Try to go any other way, and I'd have been trampled for sure. You've never seen such sights—heard such sounds. And then, of all things, I heard my own name being shouted by the guards who were protecting the palace gates, and hands were all over me and I found myself being lifted up. Yes. Here's the one. Yes, this is Private Sepoy Davey Whittings. No, no, back, back you fucking idiots. This is *him*. I feared for my life, although death and I had long since reached an understanding. But there I was, being hauled over the crowds and shoved through the gates of Saint James's Palace by Johnny Sponson's liveried guards, then led through ruined log-falls of gilded furniture that weren't so very different to those in the English Repository. Then a final door banged behind me, and I was standing alone in the great hall of Johnny's throne room.

The place seemed huge and oddly still, emptied of all the usual so-called generals, and fawning and laughing fools. But something big had been set in the middle of it—a tall thing of red curtains and lotus-carved pillars more than large enough to make a room of its own. When I peered inside it, I saw Johnny, and I realized it was some kind of bed. He was half-lying, half sitting, against these cushions, and he was smiling—almost chuckling—and he was wearing his usual cloak and a jewel-studded turban and many chains of office, and his right arm was hooked in a sling. It took me a moment to take in what I was seeing.

"So you're not dead?"

"Is that what they're saying?"

"No one knows for sure."

"And they're all crying, howling out my name?"

"What would you expect?"

He chuckled louder. "Glory," he muttered, "is like a circle of water, which never ceases to enlarge, till by broad spreading it disperses to nothing—haven't you found that to be the truth, Davey?"

"You know I don't understand that kind of fucking bollocks. I never did."

"Don't you?" He seemed surprised—almost pained. "Perhaps not."

"Why did you ask for me, Johnny? Why the fuck did you bring me here?"

Part of me wondered if he really had feared that he was dying, and had wanted to see his old pal Davey Whittings for one last time. But then, he didn't look so bad, and so many others were closer to him now—hangers on, women who dressed like princesses and acted like whores, men who smelled like butchers because of the reek of death on their clothes. Old mates of mine, some of them, although you wouldn't have recognized them now. But I was still plain old Davey Whittings, Sir, Sahib, Sepoy Second Class. With all of London wailing his name outside, I wondered if

Johnny Sponson hadn't simply wanted to see me just to remind himself of how very far he'd come.

He didn't give a straight answer to my question, of course. He never could. He just gave another one of those Johnny chuckles. He just grinned a Johnny grin. And then he started talking about how England had needed someone. Not Johnny Sponson necessarily, but he'd been the one more than anyone else who had felt that need, and had known how to fill it. Said he was like the soil of England, this sceptered Isle, this seat of majesty . . . all the usual bollocks. It really was like he was giving me his deathbed speech, even though he plainly wasn't dying. Or, more likely, he was doing the same thing that he'd done when he sat beside me in that filthy hospital, and was rehearsing what he planned to say later to a much bigger audience when he climbed the Great Temple of Ganesh, or perhaps, seeing as he was wounded, got himself hoisted up there on a wooden cross.

I could imagine his words ringing out across the adoring crowds. And I knew that they'd love him all the more now that he'd cheated death itself. And he was right, as well—when he said he gave them the spirit they needed to fight. That they needed him as much as he needed them. Without him, they'd be a rabble of looters and cutthroats—soldiers without orders. And without them . . . he'd just be plain old Johnny Sponson. The man who'd saved my life. The man I'd once grown to love.

But this different Johnny Sponson seemed pleased, excited, by his brush with a sniper's bullet. He was full of new wildness and strange hope, and odd new theories to add to all of those he already had. How, for example, the reason that the Indians had spread this Empire so far was because of their simple need to survive those dreadful few summers and freezing winters of two hundred and more years ago. How it all would have been different if something strange hadn't fallen out of the skies to darken our world. As ever, he was full of it. Nothing had changed. Part of him was just being more and more of what he already was.

Despite London being surrounded by a far larger and better-equipped army, Johnny was convinced that this wasn't the end of the English Mutiny. And, as he talked of how the Scots had seized the moment to attack beyond Hadrian's Wall and were marching south even now, and how the Lowland Hollanders would soon be breaking the Indian blockade and sailing up the Thames with fresh ships and supplies, he even began to convince me. I could feel it happening—I could see the colors returning to English green on his beloved maps, and I knew that others would believe him even more than I did. But the difference was, I hated the very thought of yet another battle, even if victory was the result. Nor could I understand why I was suddenly on the same side as the fucking Scots seeing as I'd nearly lost my life fighting them. All that would happen if we sepoys were able to break this siege and the Hollanders arrived and the Scots came to our aid was that there would be more destruction, and another year's harvest fallen to neglect as a result. Above all, there would be more deaths. Killing was the only thing that we sepoys were good for, when all was said and done. Try to get us to do anything else and we fucked it up.

I looked around me at this great and empty throne room. Johnny was going on even more now about duty, and about flags, and the need for loyalty, the need to stand up straight before what mattered, and fight for your nation and obey orders and do the right thing, even if the right thing was death. Perhaps the wound in his arm was worse than I'd thought, or perhaps he'd already taken something to help with the pain, or maybe he was simply a little drunk, but he was ranting now—and all of it was stuff I'd heard before. On parade grounds and from the mouths of officers, and back when I was a kid in the hovel we used to call home.

I reached my hand into my pocket, and felt for the loop of wire I still carried there, just like the good soldier I still was. And I opened it out and held it there while Johnny was still talking. I think it took him a moment to realize what I was about to do. And even then he didn't exactly seem surprised. After all, part of him was still like me, still a sepoy. He knew death was always waiting around the next corner, especially at the moment when you thought you'd finally left it behind.

"Why...?"

He struggled, but he was wounded—hampered by that sling and his ridiculous clothes—and my movements were quick, and by then I'd had more than enough of Johnny's bullshit talk. Still, it's not a swift death, or an easy one. You need strong hands, a strong will, to use a garrote. His loosened hands batted against me. His legs spasmed. His face reddened, then blued. His tongue went out. He leaked piss and blood. His eyes rolled. But I didn't let go. I was a soldier, a sepoy. Death was my job. But in truth, it wasn't the thought of all the fresh battles he'd urge us sepoys to fight that kept me pulling the wire. It wasn't even all the dead bodies and sobbing women and smoking skies and ruined towns that another season's fighting would bring. If the bastard had sounded like anyone toward the end in what he'd been saying, it was like my dad when he was in his cups. So it wasn't for the glory or for the sake of saving anyone or rescuing London or preserving the Empire that I killed Johnny Sponson. I simply wanted to shut the fucker up.

Someone must have decided that I'd been alone with my supposed best mate in that throne room for a little too long. Perhaps, seeing as they knew what Johnny was like, it had gone a bit quiet, as well. Whatever it was, the guards burst in yelling, and they saw instantly what I had done. Word went out from there quicker than you could ever have imagined—beyond the palace gates and across London, right out over the city walls to the waiting Indian armies with their huge siege engines and repeating guns. Johnny Sponson, Lord of whatever he was lord of, our Prince and our King—private sepoy second class, expert bullshitter, brilliant dancer, and secret son of some English Repository whore—was dead. The grief and the chaos was incredible. London burned that night. It was wrecked even before the Indians moved in to occupy it the next morning. Or so I think I've been told.

I'd imagined Johnny's guards would simply kill me. I hadn't counted on the fact that they were sepoys just like I was, and understood that death wasn't something I'd care that much about—that it was like the face of someone you're given up trying to love. They knew, as well, that their own



chances of survival and the success of this whole mutiny had vanished with Johnny Sponson's death. They'd probably even seen the bodies of their captured comrades—or, once the Indians had finished, what was left of them.

You can see what Johnny's sepoys did to me yourself. They had a whole night to work at it before the Indians breached the city walls. And work they did. Then they left me there, destroyed as I was, right there in Johnny's throne room, laid beside the body of the man I had killed as flames took hold of the rugs and tapestries and licked up the walls. Perhaps they wanted me to be a signal, a sign, although I doubt if they ever imagined I'd have survived for as long as I have.

As you will long ago have noticed, they left me my mouth and tongue after they'd cut away my legs and retwisted my arms. I miss my vanished sight the more, though, because I'd love to have seen what has been made of this newly rebuilt city on the cold northerly fringes of this great Empire. I'd like to believe it's as beautiful as sometimes, in the right fall of hope or light or darkness, I thought it might become. I can't hear you, either, kind Sir, Sahib, Brahmin, Begum, Fakir, Lord, Lady, but I do not ask for words, or alms. Just touch here on my chest where the white ash is smeared. Tell me it's true that this city has been remade into something beautiful—that I'm propped on the marble steps of a fine new temple, filled with light and mosaic and the very breath of Christ, Mohammed, Brahma—that the skies above teem with kites and flags and spires and muezzin towers and the cries of mullahs and the clamor of bells. Touch me here, where the flesh isn't so burned. Then I'll know. Then I'll understand.

And don't worry about the ash, Sir, Sahib, if your hands are clean or your clothes are smart. It'll wash off easily enough. O

## GOODBYE BILLY GOAT GRUFF

How many bridges had we traveled  
always looking ahead,  
constantly moving, never still.  
You would have stayed awhile more  
if you could, but there was that final bridge,  
that toll, that green—and you were gone.

—Jane Yolen



# CAT IN THE RAIN

Jack Skillingstead

**Jack Skillingstead recently signed with Golden Gryphon Press to produce his first collection of short stories. The book will appear in the fall of 2009. Concerning the present offering he tells us, "I always wanted to steal a Hemingway title. " 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' didn't quite fit the story, but fortunately 'Cat in the Rain' did."**

**D**aniel Porter got drunk in an Irish bar called O'Leary's. He downed two shots of Jameson's, then spent the balance of the night drinking pints of Guinness while he watched the TV mounted on the back bar between a dusty shillelagh and a bodhran. A neon beer advertisement bathed everything in nauseating green light. So much for atmosphere and the olde sod. Anytime it seemed possible somebody other than the bartender might speak to him, Daniel put out his famous repelling vibe. It was Wednesday night and O'Leary's wasn't crowded, anyway. O'Leary's was never crowded, that's why Daniel liked it.

The basketball game was interrupted periodically for special reports on the potential riot situation in Pioneer Square; O'Leary's was up town, but riots tended to wander. Daniel watched the reports with detached interest. He was a police detective, and as far off duty as he could get. Rioting had become pandemic. One city or another igniting almost every week. Protests, anti-protests, Fat Tuesday, Super Bowl victory celebration, May Day, *Arbor Day*—whateverthehell. The Pioneer Square thing had to do with new city curfew laws scheduled to go into effect at midnight. It was as if the world had gone mad with violence. Or madder, anyway. The center will not hold, all that Yeats crap. The uncertainty factor. The impotence factor. The world seemed to have reached its ultimate crisis point at the same time Daniel Porter reached *his* ultimate crisis point. In his work Daniel never trusted a coincidence.

Daniel's partner, Jimmy Bair, had a cousin who supposedly worked for the NSA. This cousin told Jimmy that, unknown to the public, alien satellites had appeared in high Earth orbit, and they were, as Bair put it, "Cloaked—you know, just like *Star Trek*. Sometimes they're *there*, and sometimes they're *not* there. For all we know they're shooting us with invisible Hate rays."

Good old Jimmy. He was Scotch-Irish, big and aggressively chummy, with a nose like a red potato. A stand-up guy no matter what. The one guy Daniel would want watching his back.

"It's a fucking sign," Bair insisted. "You know, all that crap in the Middle East, AIDS, bird flu, wars, plagues, fucking terrorists, fucking *pestilence*. Plus things in the sky. Signs and portraits, right? It all adds up to the big picture. Like the Bible."

Daniel cultivated detachment as a barrier against idiot theories, not to mention his genuine sense of impending doom. Daniel was hell on barriers. He wasn't too bad on Doom, either. For corroboration one could consult his ex-wife. Daniel had always been an asshole, to hear Nancy tell it. But lately he had become the Emperor of Assholes. Daniel couldn't help it. He reacted against the cesspool the world had become, the cesspool his life in particular had become. And he couldn't listen to any more bullshit—especially his own.

The game was over (and how), the night progressed to the AM side of the clock. Daniel threw back the dregs of his last Guinness, paid and left.

It was a hot August night. He felt sick and dizzy. Hands in his pockets, he stumbled up the street like a badly manipulated marionette. A red Toyota Echo hunkered at the corner. Daniel recognized the creased quarter panel. He stepped around a pile of cardboard and rags, staggered against his car, fumbled the key into the lock, pulled the door open, and bundled himself into the back seat. He'd rest a few minutes, regroup.

Daniel's head expanded and contracted like a balloon nipped in the mouth of an asthmatic. Time passed. Several voices rose up, all male. Something loud and metallic *clanged*. Daniel, folded and sprawled half conscious across the back seat, opened his eyes. Yellow firelight played on the roof. A rusty sound made him wince, stiff wheels grinding on pavement. Daniel sat up cautiously, his head in deflated mode.

Across the street four or five young men were pushing a burning garbage dumpster down the sidewalk. They bent their backs to it. Flames surged and lapped over their heads. Sparks, like swarms of fireflies, twisted in and out of chugging gray-black smoke.

Sensing movement behind him, Daniel turned. The pile of rags stood next to the car. He had barely registered the rags before, avoiding them with his drunk-dar. Now he realized they constituted a derelict. As the Hellfire dumpster passed on the opposite side of the street firelight flickered on the derelict's face. Except, below his ratty watch cap, he *had* no face. It was like a rudimentary manikin's head displaying the subtlest impressions and protrusions, suggesting features not yet formed. As Daniel watched, the impressions deepened, as if invisible thumbs were pressing into soft wax. Shadows quivered in the eye cups. A wet gleam occurred. Daniel's breath caught, and there was a tremendous crash across the street. He jerked around. The dumpster was now tipped over inside the display window of Talbot's. Real manikins turned into torches. The young men capered like savages, their identities lost to a mob impulse. When Daniel looked back, the derelict was gone—if he'd even been there in the first place.

He steered the Toyota up Pine Street toward Capital Hill, hunched forward, both hands fisted at the top of the wheel. Behind him sirens ululated. He became confused in the residential back streets. Nancy had kicked him out of the house only a couple of weeks ago. In the dark the hulking brick building where he now resided looked like any other. Daniel hated the apartment, hated the smallness of it, the feel of other lives having passed through. He'd almost rather sleep in the Toyota. Finally, exhausted, he parked randomly, stubbing the front tire on the curb.

His balloon head carried him through shadows, puddles of moonlight. He swayed against a noisy fence, fingers hooked in the chain link. A girl gazed at him from a third story window. She was wearing a light summer dress. There was no glass in the window. He blinked and she was gone, an apparition of his mind. The building, which otherwise appeared abandoned, seemed to lean toward him. Daniel's head drooped, balloon deflated. He felt his gorge rise for the umpteenth time since leaving O'Leary's. Without looking up again he lurched away from the fence. The next thing he knew, he was pushing open the door of his apartment.

Daniel lay on his bed and stared at the dingy white plaster with its sags and cracks and stains. His ears were ringing. Sleep eluded him, his mind meandering down empty paths. His mouth had Saharan aspirations. He worked his throat, swallowed. Finally he got up and shuffled into the bathroom. Bare feet planted on the cold tile, he leaned over the sink and slurped at cold, metallic-tasting tap water. He heard a voice conducted down the air shaft and cranked the tap off. A girl reciting a nursery rhyme, that sing-songy cadence. But it was not a child's voice. Daniel turned to the window and raised the sash. Counter-weights knocked inside the frame. A gray concrete wall faced him, so close he could almost reach out and touch it. The voice stopped. Below was a forlorn slab. He craned around and looked up. At the same time a head stuck out of the window on the next floor. A round-faced teenaged girl, eighteen or nineteen, looked down at him, her lower lip tucked between her teeth. She was very pale and serious, her shoulder length black hair hanging straight down.

Daniel said, "Hi," in a phlegmy voice.

"I thought I was all alone," the girl replied, then withdrew from sight and closed her window.

He slept into the afternoon and awoke with a headache. The sight of the unpacked, cluttered, and dusty apartment depressed him. Upon moving out of the Ballard house he'd taken two week's vacation. He wanted to settle into his new life alone, to establish himself in his new environment. But the interruption of the work routine left him prey to wounded maunders and depression. The drinking had gotten on top of him. He knew he had pushed Nancy's last button. The button's name was Julie. But he had only wanted Julie so long as he couldn't *have* her. Instead he achieved what he had really craved all along: to be totally alone. He'd even given up the girl on the internet, the one Nancy never did find out about. Daniel's isolation imperative throbbed as though infused with cos-

mic energy, perfectly accomplishing his estrangement. He'd felt this way before, when he was fourteen, during his suicide summer. Nobody knew about that.

He lay on the bed in his underwear, watching TV with the sound turned off, a Merlot bottle on the bedside table and an empty stem glass balanced on his stomach. The picture quality was bad. It was an old portable television. The antenna imperfectly snagged broadcast signals out of the air.

There was weeping in the airshaft.

For a while he pretended he didn't hear it. Then she started in on the nursery rhymes again. He couldn't quite make out the words and it bothered him. He put the glass on the table and stood up. It took him two tries, which is how he discovered he was drunk again.

In the bathroom he knelt on the floor, arms folded on the window ledge. Mary's lamb had a white fleece. As white as *snow*. Go figure. The girl's voice was sweet, trembly. There was something about that Rhyme, something he couldn't quite remember, something important. Daniel struggled with it for a minute, then gave up. As he stood, his elbow knocked a bottle of shampoo off the window ledge. It hit the slab and the cap popped off.

The girl's voice stopped for a moment. Then she said, "Is somebody there?"

Daniel stared at the blunt concrete wall. It was almost as though he were snug and safe inside a chimney. Safe from the anxieties that plagued him, safe from the world. He didn't want to come out.

"I didn't think so," the girl said. "Just another nasty trick."

Daniel cleared his throat.

"Hey—" the girl said.

Daniel addressed the wall: "I'm here, I'm not a nasty trick." He had the strangest feeling he was talking to himself.

"Let me see you."

Daniel extended his upper body out the window and twisted around. As before, she gazed down at him, her hair hanging straight.

"God," she said.

"No, just me. Dan."

"Eh. I'm Frankie."

He stared at her. Frankie was the name of the chat girl he had abandoned. This couldn't be . . .

"What were you crying about?" he asked.

"My cat ran away."

His Frankie had a cat, too. So had his ex. Daniel was allergic. Before they married, Nancy used to put the cat out when he came over. One night he woke up to the sound of rain. Nancy was asleep. The cat clung to a branch outside the bedroom window, miserable, fur matted and dripping. That was the night the damn thing disappeared. Who knew what happened to it. Hit by a car, run off. He had felt bad. Nancy told him it wasn't *his* fault, of course. Sixteen years later, though, she let him know how it *had* been his fault. And how she didn't even believe in his allergies.

"It's all psychosomatic with you," she had said. "You don't want anything around that demonstrates love, that might need you, or that you might need. Not me, not even a *cat*. You can't *take* it." Well, she had a point. He really couldn't take it.

"That's too bad," he said to Frankie.

"He's all I had left. Now they'll get me."

"Who will get you?"

"The saucer people."

Daniel felt tired.

"Will you come up here?" Frankie said.

He didn't reply. His back hurt.

"Please? I want to show you something. I'm scared."

"What is it?" he said.

"You have to see it."

The hallway seemed to tilt. Daniel kept bumping into the wall. It was too dark. On the ceiling inverted bowls glowed dimly yellow. At the end of the hallway a hydrocephalic moon leered through the broken window. Trash littered the floor. It was as though he were in two buildings at once. Which one was real? Either of them? Daniel had to haul himself up the stairs using the rail. He closed his eyes for a while and kept climbing. When he opened them again the third floor appeared normal. He found the right door and knocked.

Frankie was a small person, not much over five feet. She wore a faded summer dress in a flower print. Her legs and feet were bare. She was pretty, in a way. Mostly she made him conscious of his age, just as his unseen internet girl had. He was forty-nine.

"How old are you?" he said.

"Nineteen."

The same as *his* Frankie.

"I think I know you," he said.

"I don't think so," she said, taking his hand and leading him through a duplicate of his apartment, minus the clutter. He didn't want her to touch him but he allowed it. In the kitchen she said, "Feel that?"

He did: a cold exhalation, a draft. She pulled him to the other side of the kitchen. The draft was coming out of the narrow space next to the refrigerator. He should have been able to see the back wall. Instead there was a velvet shadow, an impression of *depth*, a vague iridescence. The draft raised his hackles. There was a strange odor. It evoked slaughterhouses, the smell of wet concrete after they've hosed the blood away. He took his hand out of Frankie's.

"The Sleeve," she said. "It's like a connecting corridor between *here* and *there*. The saucer, I guess. Like that tunnel thing at the airport that you walk through to get on the plane? It's for people like us."

Daniel really wished he hadn't come up.

"Where do you think you are right now?" she said, suddenly intense.

"Uh, your kitchen?" Daniel said.

"Wrong. They mess with our minds. First they shoot us with rays to



make us crazy. Make us more alone. You want to know what my theory is? To be human, to belong on Earth, you have to be connected to other people, you have to be yourself *and* part of the human web. When we lose that sense of connection we're vulnerable. They isolate us then they replace us. It's like an invasion. They're *replacing us*." (And he saw his own shadowed face in a cracked and spotted mirror, mouthing those words: *They're replacing us*.)

Daniel rubbed his eyes. Except for the rays and invasion bullshit her words sounded familiar. Web of human connection. He'd read that somewhere.

"Sleeping so close to an open Sleeve, my dreams started telling me things," Frankie said. "That's how I know. But I had Mojo to protect me. He isn't human but he kept me on *this* side. You have to go voluntarily. That's part of it, I think. You have to not care. You allow the replacement to come through. Kind of like inviting a vampire into the house?"

"Vampire," Daniel said.

"There isn't any getting out. I opened the door once. I was afraid to, but I opened it. I had the dumb idea I could leave the building. Mo slipped past me and I couldn't even chase after him. I call him but he doesn't come. He's not a *dog*. I guess they'll get me now. Except, I mean unless you and I connect?"

Daniel moved to the other side of the kitchen, leaned against the counter, folded his arms.

"It's relationships," Frankie said, "real human connections that keep us in the world. That's all."

She moved close to him, invading his famous boundaries. Her body was practically touching his. And Daniel's body responded to her proximity. But it was just his body. Every other facet of his being wanted to get away. He knew the drill, Alien Lonely Hate Rays notwithstanding.

"I have to go," he said.

"We should stay together. Maybe we can anchor each other? I don't want to be alone anymore."

"Frankie, I have to go."

"Let me come with you."

(His own face in the spotted mirror)

She wrapped her arms around him. He gently moved her back. She did not hold on, did not resist or cling. She was used to this. She *courted* it. Rejection was her drug. He could see that in her eyes. He'd seen it before, in other eyes. He was just another in a long line of rejecters, when he left her there in the slaughterhouse draft. It's what he told himself.

In the hall he noticed the faded pattern on the rug was the same as the one on Frankie's dress. And suddenly he remembered *maryslamb* was his Frankie's chat handle. He turned back to the closed door, brought his hand up, but didn't knock. After a moment he turned away.

He found a station that endlessly ran programs from the 1960s, shows that he'd watched when he was a kid, some only because his mother watched them, and his dad whenever he happened to be home, which

wasn't often. *The Fugitive*, *Run For Your Life*, *Burke's Law*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Star Trek*, and so on. His mother eventually ran off with some other man. Daniel remembered the terrible fight his parents had, how his dad struck his mother a hard open-handed blow across the face before she slammed out of the house for the last time. He had been twelve, and after that he mostly raised himself. But it was strange. With his eyes closed Daniel could see his mother's face. And he could see Robert Stack's face, Rod Serling's face—but not his own father's.

He was drinking beer, watching Richard Kimble and his TV ghost images. His mind was unmoored, disconnected. Footsteps creaked across the ceiling. He turned the sound down on the TV. There was more than one person up there. He listened. After a while there was only one set of footsteps. Then it was quiet.

He got up to use the bathroom. A window rattled open in the airshaft. He turned the light out and stood quietly. But after a minute he couldn't help himself. Loneliness moved through him like a subterranean tide. He opened his own window. He leaned out and looked up. The rain fell in silky whispers around her head. Her straight hair was wet and dripping.

She had no face.

Daniel jerked back. The top of his head caught the sharp edge of the window sash. Black stars pulsed around him. He reached up, fumbling, slammed the sash down, crawled back to bed.

The dawn arrived in smoky darkness. The rain was constant, thunderous. No amount of heat could dispel the dampness inside the apartment. Black mildew spotted the walls and ceiling. Daniel felt the damp entering him, greening his bones. He had lost weight. In the kitchen, rummaging for food, he held his pants up.

Something strange was happening outside the kitchen window. Just beyond the dark rain-lashed trees that crowded the building the sun was shining. Bright afternoon sun. It made little misty rainbows on the outer edge of the downpour, but penetrated no further. On the lanai attached to one of the apartments across the alley a woman stretched out on a lawn chair. She was wearing a yellow bikini top and dark glasses.

Daniel rubbed his eyes, a cold, crumbly piece of Gino's cardboard pizza in his mouth. A violent gust thumped the window, and he jumped back.

From the bathroom mirror a Dachau survivor stared out at him. He fingered his ribs. *I'm losing myself*, Daniel thought. How long had he been here? If Jimmy Bair could see him now. The alien Lonely Hate rays would never get *Jimmy*—he was too goddam jovial and big-hearted.

He recalled the faceless thing in the airshaft. It couldn't be true. He had been drunk. Frankie was still up there. *His* Frankie. He shoved the window open and called her name. When there was no reply he got dressed, not bothering to knot his shoelaces, and lurched out into the hall. Immediately he felt exposed, hollowed out and filled back up with terrible anxiety. He mustn't leave the apartment. But he did. The elastic hallway tilted and stretched and swayed. He climbed the stairs. Frankie's door stood open. He entered and found the apartment empty. In the kitchen there

was no slaughterhouse draught. The Sleeve had closed, if there had ever been a Sleeve.

He lay flat on his back, sweating in the damp chill, breathing shallowly, staring at the ceiling, his mind vacant. He was dimly aware of something scratching at the door. He ignored it. Besides, the scratching seemed as much inside his head as outside it. A cool draft touched his bare feet. Daniel's heart clenched with fear, but in a way he was ready to go. More than ready. He got up. His knees felt weak. In the tiny living room, rain shadows drained over the piled boxes and furniture. The unnatural draft emanated from a voided section of wall. Velvet darkness stretched back into vague iridescence. Something *moved* in there.

Daniel forced himself to turn aside, his heart speeding with fear. He stumbled out of the living room, remembering what Frankie had said about the cat anchoring her in the world, that small connection. He yanked the apartment door open. The hallway was empty. He tried to step out and his guts clenched and knotted, as if he were trying to step into an airplane propeller.

"Come on, Mojo," he said.

The hallway remained empty.

Daniel's throat tightened. Not even a fucking *cat*—

Then Mo came around the corner where the stairs dropped to the first floor. His fur was tawny and puffy. He hesitated, seeing Daniel.

"Here, kitty?" Daniel said, without much hope.

Mo looked at him, for a moment stood stock still with tail high, then padded over.

Chuck Norris and his ghosts hawked the Total Gym at the foot of Daniel's bed. The rain was like sand blowing against the windows. A slaughterhouse draft breathed through the apartment, and Daniel mostly stayed under the covers. Mo curled against him on top of the bedspread, his little furnace body thrumming. Mo wore a collar, but the name on the collar was "Fritz," not "Mojo." This nagged at Daniel. His mind tried and failed to get around it.

Mo didn't care for his new diet of frozen pizza. His stool was runny and especially odoriferous. Daniel couldn't house-train him, since he himself was afraid to leave the apartment, let alone the building. He tore pages out of an old *Esquire* magazine and arranged them on the bathroom floor between the sink and tub and tried to direct Mo's bowel to evacuate there and only there. No dice.

Mo grew restless. He prowled the confines of the apartment, hunting avenues of escape. Daniel erected a barrier of boxes between the hallway and the living room, afraid Mo would disappear into the Sleeve. He almost wished the cat *would* disappear. Daniel's eyes and nose were runny. When he breathed his lungs made a raspy sound. He knew Mo was his protection against *them*. Nevertheless, there were times when even Mo's presence was too much. The shit and allergies didn't help.

\* \* \*

Daniel woke out of fitful sleep. His nose was completely plugged, and his eyes felt *gritty*. When he tried to sit up, Mo was right there, practically smothering his face.

"Gah." Daniel pushed the cat roughly away, off the bed. It landed solidly on all fours. "Why don't you go take a shit somewhere," Daniel said.

Later, after he'd splashed cold water on his face and woken up sufficiently, he felt bad. He called Mo but the cat didn't appear. There was plenty of junk in the apartment, plenty of hidey places.

"Come on, Mo."

He began to panic. He searched more vigorously, shoving boxes aside, crawling on hands and knees to peer behind bookcases, kitchen appliances, under furniture. Finally he gave up. Standing in the bathroom, hugging himself against the cold damp, he said, in a voice choked with tears: "Goddamn it, Mo. Fuck you, then. Who needs you."

Two lightbulbs burned out, one in the kitchen and one in the hall. He'd kept every light burning continuously and had no replacements. The apartment became gloomy. Daniel dreaded the dark. He stayed in bed, watching TV. He was always cold and he huddled under the covers, a scrofulous skin-and-bone man.

The television reception became worse. Ghosts overlapping ghosts, overlapping ghosts, and everybody with a mouthful of static. Daniel felt sick with isolation. But he didn't think about Nancy or anybody else, particularly. He was long past thinking about Frankie, for instance. Or his parents. But the cat was a fresh wound. He missed Mojo, the uncomplicated companionship.

Dampness seeped through the walls. The ceiling was fuzzed with mold. The plaster appeared soft, mealy. Daniel was almost not there. He stared at the *Andy Griffith Show*. Endless television buoyed him on a sea of alpha waves.

A lightbulb directly above him burned out with a thin glassy *pop*. Daniel stiffened.

The Sleeve beckoned. A slaughterhouse draft breathed through his covers, shivering him. It was time. His isolated heart had extended an invitation to the vampire. He threw the covers back and swung his feet to the floor, pulled on a pair of pants and cinched the belt to the last notch to keep them from sliding off his skinny hips.

Daniel started down the hall, fatalistically drawn to the Sleeve. Wind whumped the loose kitchen window. He glanced over. *Mo* was out there in the blowing rain, clinging pathetically to a branch, his fur matted and streaming. Daniel experienced a pang of guilt and deep yearning loneliness.

And then stopped.

Because it was impossible for Mo to be out there in the rain. Flat impossible. All the windows were shut tight and the door firmly closed and locked.

*That was Nancy's cat.*

And the illusion began to collapse around him.

The light dimmed, flickered. The familiar clutter vanished, replaced by stark emptiness, brown walls, broken lathe and plaster gritty underfoot. In the kitchen an ancient electric stove was pulled away from the wall, the front gaping like an idiot mouth. He'd been alone all this time. He'd conjured Frankie up out of memory and imagination and desperation.

*They mess with your mind.*

And his mind messed back. He blundered backward down the hall. Glancing into the bathroom, he caught his haggard reflection in the cracked and spotted mirror—the face that talked to him. He backed up to the apartment door, cranked the knob behind him, pulled it open and fell into the hall. *Nancy's cat. And Frankie was maryslamb, that dumb phrase she used to type about the web of human connection, referring to the net.* Daniel rolled onto his knees, looked up. The hallway was a ruin. Light fixtures dangled by wires from the ceiling. An overlapping occurred. The broken window at the end of the hall was momentarily restored, then crashed out and haphazardly boarded over, then restored.

He staggered to his feet, fighting dark/light visions, flung open the door to the rear, outside stairs. He staggered down to the alley behind the building. Rain pounded deafeningly on the sheet metal lids of the garbage dumpsters. A dark brick ruin loomed over him. Swinging drunkenly around the side of the building, he saw Mojo huddled at the base of the tree, the rain having beaten him to a yellow rag of matted fur. *Not Mo. Fritz. That was Nancy's cat: Fritz. Frankie (maryslamb) had a cat named Mo but he never saw it, because he never saw her.* They had messed with his mind, and his mind had fought back, conjuring companions, unraveling.

Whatever its name was, the cat reacted to the sight of Daniel, darting around to the front of the apartment building.

*There is no fucking cat,* Daniel thought wildly.

He started to follow Mo anyway but made it only as far as the tree. He fell against it, the rough bark digging into his cheek. The rain was drowning him. He thought of his good bed, the covers pulled up, the television soothing with the familiar ghosts of his past. Up there is where he belonged. He raised his head. On the second floor a dim figure stepped back from the window.

*Follow the cat.*

He lurched away from the tree, came around the front of the building. Mo/Fritz was gone. Beyond the dark veil of rain a vague, muted light persisted. Daniel stepped toward the light . . . and encountered a fence. Chain-link. Summoning reserves of strength he hoisted himself up and over, ripping his shirt on a sharp twist of metal. He fell to the other side, rolled and stood up, and first the rain and then even the sound of rain fell away. He held his hand up, palm outward against the brilliant August sun. Time dilation, he thought, remembering some science fiction movie. A sign attached to the fence announced the building's future demolition. It wasn't *his* building. Little wet paw prints tracked away on the white sidewalk. Daniel began to follow them, bare feet slapping the hot paving. And then the prints vanished before his eyes, and his clothes were dry,

and he was just a raggedy man staggering along, voices mumbling in his head.

He lived on First Avenue. His home was a broken down cardboard box that had once held a forty-six-inch plasma television set. He sat on the box and waited for people to drop coins in the old Starbucks cup. A certain number of passersby did so, and they were his tenuous web of human connection. Most people ignored him, though. And even those who paused, because he looked as though he had once been a normal person, a nice man, a down on his luck man, were eventually repelled when he told them about his cat and the saucer people.

"Thank you, thank you," he said, when coins rattled into his little cup. "I have a cat to feed, you know."

There was no cat. Daniel knew he was crazy, and he wished someone would lead him back to his senses.

Twilight was upon the world, and he was afraid. He dragged his cardboard into the recessed doorway of an Army-Navy surplus store. Nights were bad. Wherever he huddled he was alone and could feel the slaughterhouse draft, the opening of the Sleeve, the dreadful invitation formulating in his mind.

"Dan Porter, is that you?"

Daniel looked up. A tall, wide man in a sport coat a size too small stood above him. He had a potato nose.

"Jimmy Bair," Daniel said.

Bair crouched beside him. "My God. Flynn told me he saw you. I told him he was out of his fucking mind. Look at you."

"You were right," Daniel said.

"Yeah? What about?"

"The alien satellites and their invisible Hate Rays, for one thing. Only they're Lonely rays, too. Jesus Christ, Jimmy, they're ruining the world. They're replacing us."

Jimmy Bair nodded but he looked sad.

"Sure, and don't I know it," he said.

"You're the one who warned me."

"Yeah."

Jimmy reached out and touched Daniel's hand. Daniel pulled the hand away.

"I—I don't like to be touched," he said.

"I know."

"It's part of it. They mess with our minds. They want us to be isolated, so we'll go and they can take over."

"If you say so, Danny."

Tears welled up in Daniel's eyes. None of it was true. He wanted to get better. "Thank God you're here, Jimmy. You don't really believe it all, do you?"

"I do." Jimmy Bair smiled. Then he poked at Daniel with his fingers, not touching him, but almost touching him, and when Daniel cowered back, whimpering, Jimmy Bair's smile got wider. ○



## A CRISIS OF FOREST

In the forest center at the world's center  
in a bower of flowers Stagman sleeps,  
spirit of the wild green, nature's protector.

For eons brown hands nurtured spring beauty,  
writ wild green sermons Jack Pulpit preached  
in the forest center at the world's center.

He called to the wolves, ran with the deer,  
sang windsongs to souls of fallen fledglings,  
protector of the wild green spirit of nature.

On the edge of the forest, asphalt creeps.  
Traffic exhaust filters through sleep  
in the forest center at the world's center.

His antlers once spanned centuries turning;  
In his circle of oaks, Stagman stirs restlessly,  
protector of the wild, green spirit of nature.

Bulldozers roar; chainsaws shriek.  
Beneath falling oak leaves, Stagman wakes  
in the forest center at the world's center.

His flowery bower's razed for McNuggold's;  
Stagman escapes, his antlers nicked,  
spirit's wild green, nature's protector.

Beneath golden arches, salads are crisp  
but fries turn green; milkshakes go fey  
in the forest center at the world's center.

Customers shed clothes, sex steams the aisles.  
Behind empty cash drawers, Stagman smiles—  
spirit's wild greening, nature's protector;  
forests returning center the world.

—Sandra Lindow



# TRUTH

Robert Reed

The author tells us “ ‘Truth’ is a companion piece to ‘Veritas’ (July 2002). When I started working on it, I assumed that it would neatly parallel the first story’s plot—a small group of invaders from the future hell-bent on conquering a more primitive world—but that vision was soon thrown under the bus. And, as so often happens when I am enjoying a project, stuff happens that is as surprising to me as I hope it is to my audience. This is also the first story I’ve written while linked to Wikipedia. My research there and elsewhere on the Internet has probably been noticed by government software.”

## 1

Three days later, I still hadn’t met our prisoner. But I had invested nearly sixty hours watching what seemed to be a gentle life that revolved around old novels and classic movies. I took note of his postures and motions, and I tried gauging his reactions to what he was seeing on the page and screen. But most interesting to me were those occasional moments when he did nothing but stare off in some empty direction. I wouldn’t let myself guess what he was thinking. But the black eyes would open wide, and the handsome features would quickly change their expression. Smiles lasted longer than frowns, I noticed. I saw flashes of pity and scorn, mild embarrassment and tight-lipped defiance. A few staff members volunteered opinions about the prisoner’s mind. He was reflecting on his childhood, some offered. Others claimed he was gazing into our shared past or the looming future. But what I focused on was an appealing and graceful face that moved effortlessly between emotions—the well-honed tools of the consummate actor.

Twice each day, the prisoner was ushered into a long exercise yard built specifically for him. His gait was always relaxed, long arms swinging with a metronome’s precision and the elegant hands holding five-pound weights, shaped like dog bones and covered with soft red rubber. I

thought of an aging fashion model marching on the runway, except he lacked a model's wasted prettiness or the vacuous gaze. He was endlessly pleasant to whichever guard was standing at the locked door. I paid close attention to his attempts at conversation, his words less important than his charming tone and the effortless, beguiling smiles. Most of the staff was under orders to never speak with the man, which made for intriguing games of will. Somehow he had learned each guard's first name, and he wasn't shy about using what he knew. "How's this day of ours, Jim?" he might ask. "Is it the best day ever? Or is just me who thinks this way? Feel the sunshine. Listen to these birds singing. Doesn't this kind of morning make you happy to your bones, Jim?"

There was no sun underground, and there were no birds to hear. But after twelve years and five months of captivity, one man seemed to be absolutely thriving.

I watched the five daily prayers, the salat. But I didn't intrude when the prisoner used the bathroom or shower. (Let others record what he washed and wiped. I could check the database later, if I found reason.) While he slept, I sipped coffee and kept passing tabs on his snoring and the busy dreaming brain. Delicate instruments buried inside his Tempur-pedic mattress tried to convince me that they provided a window into that unknowable soul. But there were no insights, of course. That's why those nights were opportune times to pick my way through an endless array of summaries and reports, clinical data and highly intelligent, utterly useless speculation.

A favorite teacher once told me that our bodies are epics full of treachery and important residues. That's why I turned again and again to the medical data. Samples of the prisoner's fluids and flesh and his thick black hair had been digested and analyzed by a laboratory built for no other purpose. Three thousand years of medical science struggling to turn meat and bone into a narrative that I could understand. But in most cases, my subject's DNA was remarkably unremarkable—save for a few dozen novel genes tucked into the first and fifth and nineteenth chromosomes, that is. The dental evidence was unusual, but not remarkably so. The first x-rays had revealed an old break in the right wrist that never healed properly. Later, more intrusive examinations had found an assortment of microscopic features that might mean much, unless they were meant to mislead. Only a handful of qualified experts had been allowed to examine that body in full; yet even those few voices managed to produce a chorus of contradictory opinions about the man's nature and origins. Was our prisoner telling the truth about his birth and life? And if not, from where did he come and what could he possibly represent?

Of course those medical masters were shown only a nameless patient and a carefully trimmed, strategically incomplete biography.

In a dozen years, only nine people had been given full access to every transcript, test result, and digital image. I was one of the nine, or so I had been promised. One can never feel too certain about a government's confidences, particularly when it involves its deepest, most cherished secret.

The prisoner was known as Lemonade-7.

That designation was entirely random. But the copious records showed

that yes, he was given that drink once, and after two sips he said, "Too sour," and ordered that it was never to be brought to him again.

"Ramiro" was the name he went by. And for reasons that might or might not be significant, he had never offered any surname.

"So what about Ramiro?" Jefferson asked.

"What do you mean?"

"When will you actually get to work on him?"

"That's what I'm doing," I replied.

Jefferson was the prison's CIA administrator. This had been his post from the beginning, which was remarkable. In any normal operation, he would have been replaced by a sequence of ambitious, usually younger types. New guards and fresh staff would have come and spent their allotted time and then gone away again. But that would have swollen the pool of individuals who knew too much about matters that didn't exist, and what the public had never suspected would have soon leaked out into the world.

"I realize you're doing work," Jefferson said. "But are you ever going to talk to Ramiro?"

"Actually, I'm speaking to him now."

Jefferson was a short, squat fellow with thinning brown hair and a close-cut beard that turned to snow years ago. His files gave the portrait of an officer who had been a success at every stage of his professional life. Running this prison was an enormous responsibility, but until last week, he seemed to be in complete control. Then events took a bad, unexpected turn, and maybe more than one turn, and the stress showed in his impatient voice and the irritability that seeped out in conversation and during his own prolonged silences.

Jefferson glared at me, then looked back at the monitors.

"Okay," he whispered. "You're speaking to him now."

"In my head," I said. Looking at Jefferson, I used my most ingratiating smile. "I'm practicing. Before I actually go in there, I want to feel ready."

"You've had five days to prepare," he reminded me.

Circumstances put a timetable on everything. Two days had been allotted to a full briefing, and then I was brought here, and for three days I had enjoyed the freedoms and pressures of this ultra-secure compound.

"Collins went straight in," said Jefferson.

Collins was a certified legend in my little business.

"Right into Ramiro's cell and started talking with him." That was twelve years ago, but Jefferson still had to admire what my colleague had accomplished.

"He also stopped the torture," I mentioned.

Jefferson shook his head. "He liked claiming that, I know. But everything about the interrogation was my call. I'm the one who put an end to the cold rooms and sleep deprivation."

I offered a less-than-convinced nod.

"And by the way," he continued, "I was responsible for bringing Collins in from the Bureau."

"I guess I'd read that," I admitted.

"And I just happen to be the hero who let your colleague work however

he wanted, whatever method he thought was best, and fuck those hundred thousand orders that Washington was giving us then."

The old bureaucrat still had a belly full of fire and bile. He offered a very quick, completely revealing grin, sitting back in his chair while thinking hard about past glories.

"But you didn't select me, did you?"

"I guess not," he said.

"Collins picked me," I said. "Last year, wasn't it? Not that anybody told me, of course. But in case he couldn't serve anymore, I was his first choice as a replacement."

Jefferson shifted his weight, saying nothing.

"I'll grant you, the candidate list is short. But you'd have to admit, I'm rather well regarded."

Jefferson shrugged.

"If you want," I mentioned, "I can suggest a viable candidate to replace me. In the event you lose all faith in my methods."

He was tempted. I saw it in his face, particularly in the sly smile.

"But that would mean more delays," I warned. "And I doubt if my replacement would be as effective as me."

"You're a cocky gal, aren't you?"

"It has been said."

"Help you get ahead, does it?"

"It helps keep me sane, mostly."

Jefferson turned away, staring at the largest screen. The prisoner was sitting at his desk, reading Jane Austen in Portuguese. The date and time were fixed in the bottom right corner: August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Three minutes after three in the afternoon.

"Before I go in there," I began.

"Yeah?"

"Tell me about the first days," I said. "Before you brought in Collins. Right after Ramiro was caught . . . what was your mood, early on?"

"My mood?" His smile grew bigger and sourer, wrapped around a painful memory. "You can imagine what I was thinking. March 2002, Osama was still the big monster, and some stateless warrior slips across the Canadian border with five kilos of bomb-grade U-235. That's what I was thinking about. But his luck hit a stretch of black ice in Montana, and the state trooper found his Maxima flipped on its back, this bastard behind the steering wheel, unconscious."

I had seen hundreds of images of the crash scene.

"The man's fingerprints were unknown. His passport and identity were quality fakes, but we couldn't tell which foreign power had done the work. Nobody knew who he was. Al Qaeda, or Iraqi, or was he something else? All we knew was that, at the very least, our prisoner was part of somebody's A-bomb project."

"You needed to know everything, and as fast as possible."

"How many like this guy were there?" Jefferson turned in my direction, but never quite made eye contact. "And would his associates be happy hitting New York or Washington? Or did they have more terrible targets in mind?"

I found it interesting: The person most familiar with the full story was still jolted with a simple replay of known events. Jefferson tensed up as he spoke about that heavy lump of gray metal, shaped like a cannon ball and hidden by the spare tire.

"We didn't know anything," he continued, "but it was obvious our man was the biggest trophy in the ongoing war. That's why another Maxima and a compliant corpse were rolled off that Montana highway, the crash restaged and the wreckage burned up. It was treated like an ordinary accident. Now our prisoner had a good reason to miss his next clandestine rendezvous, wherever than might be. Because he was officially dead."

"You unleashed a lot of specialists," I said. "Working their delicate magic on his stubborn corpse."

Jefferson didn't like my tone.

"You had to make the call," I continued. "The stakes seemed treacherously high. The proverbial fuse was burning down."

"Don't give me that attitude," Jefferson warned. "Your career has seen its share of hard interrogations."

I admitted, "It has," without hesitation. "And believe me, I will never question those early decisions."

What was the point now, after all?

Jefferson heard resignation where none was offered, and because he was a good career officer, he made his features soften.

"A frustrating subject, the records say."

"He was."

"Hard interrogations and potent drugs, in tandem. But how much good did all that do?"

He didn't answer.

I asked, "So who figured it out first?"

"Figured what out?"

"Ramiro's list," I said.

With only his eyes, Jefferson smiled. "It's all in the files."

"I don't always believe what I read."

"No?"

"But here's my understanding of the story," I said, leaning forward. "For five months, that man was abused relentlessly. Every half-legal method was applied to him, often several at once. Then you brought in a fresh crew—old KGB hands, as I understand it—who brought tricks that made everybody feel Hell's breath. And what did you get in the end? Nothing. Your prisoner gave us nothing. He didn't offer any name. He didn't even utter an intelligible word. He screamed on occasion, sure. But only after his elbows were pulled from their joints. And the curses weren't in any known language."

I paused, waiting.

Jefferson said nothing.

"And then one day, when his arms were working again, he motioned to his interrogators. He indicated that he wanted a paper and a pen. And when those items were delivered, he filled several pages with letters and numbers—peculiar looking to the untrained eye, if not out-and-out bizarre."



The original list was sitting in an important vault. I pulled out one of the three copies that had been made since, the writing neat and legible, with a few artistic flourishes, particularly in the 5s and Ts.

"So tell me," I said. "Who figured this puzzle out?"

Jefferson named one of his staff. Then he quietly reminded me, "It's all in the records."

"No," I said. "I think the genius was you."

Surprise turned to wary pleasure. With a smug little wink, he asked, "How could it be me?"

"Because you would have gotten the first look at his list. And you're a bright, bright fellow with a lot of hobbies. I know that because I've checked your files too. I think what happened is that something he wrote jogged a leftover memory from your school days. In particular, from astronomy class. The first sequence in each line is obviously a position in the sky, if you know the subject. But it takes a bigger leap to realize that the second sequence is a date."

"It took me five minutes," he boasted.

"Easy to do, as long as you understand that the dates are based on the Islamic calendar. The significance of both notations, taken together, would have been answered on maybe a dozen websites. But that answer was crazy. And it left you with a much bigger puzzle sitting inside a cold, cramped cell. Even the earliest dates on Ramiro's list occurred after his incarceration. And each one marked the day and position of a supernova bright enough to be noticed by earthbound astronomers."

Jefferson put his arms around his chest and squeezed, shaking his head with an enduring astonishment.

"You were the one, weren't you?"

He admitted, "Yes."

"But you didn't trust your insight," I suggested.

"Like you said. It looked crazy."

"So in a very general fashion, you told your subordinate to see if the list might just have something to do with the sky. Because you're a smart player, and if your wild idea didn't pan out, you wouldn't be held accountable."

Jefferson knew better than to respond.

"And how long did you have to wait?" I asked. "Before the next supernova sprang into existence precisely where it was supposed to be?"

"You know."

"Seven days," I answered. "And that's when you were certain. Sitting in the cold room was something far more dangerous than a few pounds of uranium. Somehow our terrorist, or whatever he was, knew the future. Against all reason, Ramiro could predict celestial events that nobody should be able to anticipate in advance."

Tired, satisfied eyes closed and stayed closed.

"That's when you went out and found Collins. An entirely different species of interrogator. A smart, relentless craftsman with a history of convincing difficult people to talk about anything. And for twelve years, you have sat here watching your prize stallion slowly, patiently extract an incredible story from your prisoner."

Jefferson nodded, smiled. But the eyes remained closed.

I stared at the creature sitting inside his spacious, comfortable cell. And with a measured tone, I reminded both of us, "This is the most thoroughly studied individual in the world. And for a long time, he has given us the exact minimum required to keep everyone happy enough. And as a result, he has maintained control over his narrow life. And yours."

Jefferson finally looked at me, squirming a little in his chair.

"Fuck timetables," I said. "I think that I'm being exceptionally sensible not to march in there and offer my hand and name."

"I see your point," he allowed.

"To be truthful? This entire situation terrifies me." I hesitated, and then said, "It's not every day you have the opportunity, and the honor, and the grave responsibility of interviewing somebody who won't be born for another one hundred years."

2

Jefferson can write the history however he wants. Collins' arrival was what brought real, substantive changes for the prisoner. The still nameless man was unchained and allowed to wash, and under newly imposed orders, his guards brought him clean clothes and referred to him as "sir." Then after the first filling breakfast in twenty weeks, he was escorted to a comfortably warm room with a single folding chair of the kind you would find in any church basement.

In those days, Collins worked with a partner, but the two agents decided that it was smarter to meet the mysterious visitor on a one-to-one basis.

Collins carried in his own chair, identical to the first, and he opened it and sat six feet from the prisoner's clean bare feet.

For a long while he said nothing, tilting his face backward so that the overhead light covered him with a warm, comforting glow. I have watched that first meeting twenty times, from every available angle. The interrogator was a bald little man, plain-faced but with brilliant blue eyes. I knew those eyes. I first met Collins in the late nineties, at some little professional conference. From across the room, I noticed his perpetual fascination with the world and how his effortless, ever-graceful charm always found some excuse to bubble out. Collins had ugly teeth, crooked and yellow. But his smile seemed genuine and always fetching, and the voice that rose from the little body was rich and deep. Even his idle chatter sounded important, as if it rose from God's own throat.

For a full ninety seconds, the interrogator made no sound.

The prisoner calmly returned the silence.

Then Collins sat back until the front legs of his chair lifted, and he laughed with an edge to his voice, and waving his hand at the air, he said in good Arabic, "We don't believe you."

In Farsi, he claimed, "We can't believe you."

And then in English, he said, "I'm here to warn you. One lucky guess won't win you any friends."

"Which guess is that?" the prisoner replied, in an accented, difficult-to-place strain of English.

Those were the first words he had uttered in captivity.

"You have some passing experience with astronomy, I'll grant you that." Collins had the gift of being able to study arcane subjects on the fly and then sound painfully brilliant. For the next six minutes, he lectured the prisoner about the stars, and in particular, how giant stars aged rapidly and soon blew up. Then he calmly lied about the tools available to the Hubble telescope and the big mirrors on top of Hawaii. "You had access to this data. Obviously. In your previous life, you must have studied astronomy. That's why you took the chance and gave us some random dates, and by pure coincidence, a few stars happened to blow up in just about the right slices of the sky."

A thin smile and a dismissive shrug of the shoulders were offered.

"Or maybe you are genuine," Collins allowed. "The implication, as far as I can tell, is that you can see the future. Which is insane. Or you know the future because you came from some to-be time. Which seems even crazier, at least to me. But if that's true, then I guess it means I should feel lucky. Just being in your presence is a privilege. How many times does somebody get to meet a genuine time traveler?"

Silence.

"But if that's true," Collins continued, "then I have to ask myself, 'Why spring this on us now? And why this strange, cosmic route?'"

The silence continued for most of a minute.

"We can't break you," Collins finally pointed out. "Believe me, I know how these things work. What you've endured over these weeks and months . . . any normal person would have shattered ten different ways. Not that you'd be any help to us. Torture is a singularly lousy way of discovering the truth. Beaten and electrocuted, the average person ends up being glad for the chance to confess. To any and every crime we can think of, particularly the imaginary misdeeds. But everybody here has been assuming that we're dealing with a normal human specimen. And what I think is . . . I think that isn't the case here. Is it?"

The prisoner had a thin face and thick black hair that had been shaved to the skull, and in a multitude of ways, he was handsome. His teeth were white and straight. His shoulders were athletic, though captivity had stolen some of his muscle. He was mixed-blooded, European ancestors dancing with several other races. The best estimate of his age put him at thirty-two. But nobody had yet bothered to examine his genetics or his insides. We didn't appreciate that his indifference to pain had organic roots, including novel genes and buried microchines that insulated both his body and stubborn mind.

"Okay, you want us to believe that you're special," Collins said.

The prisoner closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he took a dramatic breath and then said nothing.

"But I don't think you appreciate something here. Do you know just how stupid and slow governments can be? Right this minute, important people are thinking: So what? So he knows a few odd things about the sky. I'm impressed, yes. But I'm the exception. Maybe there are some

bright lights in the administration who see the implications. Who are smart enough to worry. But do you actually know who sits in the Oval Office today? Do you understand anything about our current president? He is possibly the most stubborn creature on the planet. So when this clever game of yours is presented to him, how do you think it's going to play out?"

The prisoner watched Collins.

"We won't torture you anymore. I promise that." And after a long sigh, Collins added, "But that isn't what you care about, I'm guessing. Not really. Something else matters to you. It deeply, thoroughly matters, or why else would you be here? So let's pretend for the next moment that your list of supernovae is true. You can see the future. Or, better, you come from there. And if it is possible to travel in time, then I guess it stands to reason that you aren't alone, that others made the journey with you."

Here the prisoner's heart quickened, half a dozen machines recording the visible rise in his interest.

"I'm guessing you're part of a group of time tourists. Is that about right?"

In Collins' copious notes, written several hours later, was the open admission that he had taken a chance here, making an obvious but still bizarre guess.

"You come from some distant age," he continued. "You're the child of an era where this is normal. People can easily travel into their past. And who knows what other miracle skills you have at your disposal? Tools and weapons we can't imagine. Not to mention the historic knowledge about our simple times. Yet here you are. You've been sitting in the same closet for five months, and after all this time, maybe it's finally occurred to you that your friends and colleagues—these other visitors from tomorrow—have no intention of rescuing you from this tedious mess."

In myriad ways, the body betrays the mind. With the flow of the blood and the heat of the skin, the prisoner's body was showing each of the classic signatures of raw anger.

"If I was part of a team," Collins began, "and we leaped back a thousand years into the past . . ."

Then, he hesitated.

The prisoner leaned forward slightly, waiting.

"To the Holy Land, let's suppose. And suppose I was captured. The Saracens don't know what to make of me, but just to be safe, they throw me into their darkest dungeon." Collins sat back, his chair scrapping against the tiled floor. "Well, sir, I can promise you this: I would damn well expect my friends to blow a hole in the stone wall and then pluck me out of there with a good old futuristic Blackhawk helicopter."

The prisoner leaned back.

Quietly, in that accented English of his, he said, "One hundred and forty years."

"That's how far back you jumped?"

"A little farther, actually." The prisoner grinned faintly, mentioning, "We have been among you now for several years."

"Among us?"

"Yes."

"And who is 'we'?"

"Our leader. And his followers." The prisoner paused, smiling. "We call the man Abraham."

Collins hesitated. Then he carefully repeated the name. "Abraham."

"The father of three great religions, which is why he took that important name for himself."

"You came here with Abraham."

"Yes."

"And how many others?"

Silence.

Collins was not acting. He was worried, his fingers shaking despite the room's heat, his voice trembling slightly as he asked, "How many of these friends came with you?"

"None."

"What. . . ?"

"They are not my friends," the prisoner stated.

"Why? Because they won't save you?"

"No." The thin face tilted backward, teeth flashing in the light. "Because I have never particularly liked those people."

"Then why join up?" Collins put his hands together, squeezing the blood out of his fingers. "Why go to the trouble of leaping back to our day?"

"I believed in their cause."

"Which is?"

No answer was offered.

"You want to change the future? Is that your grand purpose?"

The prisoner shrugged. "In one fashion or another."

Collins leaned close, and for the first time he offered his name and an open hand. "You're being helpful, sir, and I thank you."

The prisoner shook the hand. Then he quietly said, "Ramiro."

"Is that your name?"

"Yes."

"I'm pleased to know it, Ramiro."

"Don't put me back into that cell again, Collins."

"But I have to," the interrogator replied.

Ignoring that answer, Ramiro said, "I have a set of demands. Minimal requirements that will earn my cooperation, I promise you."

"Two names and the vague beginnings of a story," Collins countered. "That won't earn you much."

"And I will ask you this: Do you want to defeat the invaders?" When it served his purpose, Ramiro had a cold, menacing smile. "If you insist on mistreating me, even one more time, I will never help you."

"I don't have any choice here," Collins told him.

"Yes," said Ramiro. "Yes, you do."

"No."

Then the prisoner leaned back in his chair, and through some secretive, still mysterious route, he woke a microscopic device implanted inside his angry heart.

For the next one hundred seconds, Ramiro was clinically dead.

By the time he was fully conscious again, calls had been made. Desperate orders had been issued and rescinded and then reissued. Careers

were either defined or shattered. And the only soldier from a secretive, unanticipated army was given every demand on a list of remarkably modest desires.

## 3

**M**y home was an efficiency apartment no bigger than Ramiro's quarters and only slightly more comfortable. But I was assured that no tiny cameras were keeping tabs on me. As a creature of status, I also enjoyed communications with the outside world—albeit strained through protocols and electronic filters run by intelligence officers sitting in the field station outside the prison. And unlike our number-one citizen, I was free to move where I wished, including jogging along the wide, hard-packed salt streets that combined for a little less than six kilometers of cumulative distance.

No one had ever predicted “temporal jihadists,” as Abraham's agents were dubbed. Uranium-toting terrorists suddenly seemed like a minor threat by comparison. Collins' first interview resulted in a secret and very chaotic panic roaring through Washington. Black ops funds were thrown in every direction. Ground was broken for half a dozen high-security prisons scattered across the world. But then some wise head inside Langley decided that if time travelers were genuine, then there was no telling what they knew, and if they were inspired, there were probably no limits to what they could achieve. A tropical island might look fetching in the recruitment brochure, but how could you protect your prisoner/asset from death rays and stealth submarines? How would any facility set on the earth's surface remain hidden from prying eyes? The only hope, argued that reasonable voice, was to hide underground, and short, efficient logistical lines were only possible inside the United States. That's why the last prison to receive funding was the only one finished and staffed: an abandoned salt mine set beneath Kansas, provided with a bank of generators and layers of security that kept everyone, including most of its citizens, happily confused about its truest purpose.

Each guard was a volunteer, most of them pulled from submarine duty. To qualify, they couldn't have close families, and like everyone on the skeletal staff, they were forewarned that leaves would be rare events, and brief, and subject to various kinds of shadowing.

Most people didn't even apply for leaves anymore, preferring the safety of the underground while padding their retirement funds.

Life inside the salt mine was never unpleasant, I was told. My superiors—those gray-haired survivors of these last decade-plus—liked to boast about the billions that had been spent on full-spectrum lights and conditioned air, plus the food that most of the world would be thrilled to find on their plates. But nobody went so far as to claim that I was fortunate, nor that this posting was a blessing. The terms of my assignment were grim, any success would bring repercussions, and nobody with half a brain told me that this was an honor, or for that matter, a choice.

Collins' slot had to be filled, and I was the new Collins.



"Ma'am?"

I showed the guard my ID and badge.

"I don't need them, ma'am. I know who you are."

I was a slow, sweat-drenched jogger who had slugged her way through three kilometers of dressed-up tunnels. Technically the guard was off-duty, and he was using his free time to fling a colorful hand-tied fly into what looked like an enormous water-filled stock tank.

"Any bites?" I asked.

"A few."

"Trout?"

I knew the water was too warm for trout. But the questions you ask often define you in a stranger's mind, and I thought it was smart to start with a mistake.

"Bluegill," he told me.

"Really?" I sounded interested.

He was a big strong man, a kid when he arrived here and still younger than me by quite a lot. But in a society where males outnumbered females ten-to-one, I had to be an object of some interest.

"Ever fish?" he asked.

"No," I lied.

He thought about offering to teach me. I saw it in his eyes, in the tilt of his head. But then he decided on caution, forcing himself to mutter a few colorless words. "They bite, but they're too tiny to keep."

Surrounding the tank were huge plastic pots, each one holding a tropical tree or a trio of shrubs. Some of the foliage was thriving. Most just managed to limp along. I could see where a few million dollars had gone, and I suppose it helped the cave dwellers to coexist with living plants. But I could also imagine that a sickly lemon tree standing under fancy fluorescent lights would just as surely defeat a soul or two.

"What's your name?" I asked.

He began with his rank.

"Your first name," I interrupted. "What do friends call you?"

"Jim."

"Hi, Jim. I'm Carmen."

To the boy's credit, he saw through me. "You already know my name. Don't you, ma'am?"

"Carmen," I insisted.

But he wouldn't say it. He reeled in his feathery fly, pinning the hook to the largest eyelet, and then he did a modestly convincing job of packing up his tackle. He didn't want to stop fishing, but my presence made him uncomfortable.

"So you know who I am?"

Jim nodded.

"And maybe you're wondering if this is a coincidence, our paths crossing in the park like this?"

"It isn't," he stated.

"Probably not," I agreed.

Surrounding the stock tank was a narrow cedar deck. I happened to be blocking the stairs leading down.

"Talk to me for a minute," I said.

Not as an order, just a request.

Jim hesitated. Then with a nervous grin, he said, "Yeah. I found him."

"Collins?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I didn't react.

"Is that what you wanted to ask me?"

I nodded. "You found him inside his apartment."

"Yes."

My sense of the moment was that the young man was embarrassed, first and foremost. Security was his duty, and one of the most important citizens of this nameless, unmapped town died during his watch.

"I read your report," I mentioned.

The boy's eyes were open but blind. He was gazing back in time, crossing a little more than a week, standing before a long dark pool of congealed blood leading to a pale corpse sitting in bathwater that had turned chill.

"Did you know Collins very well, Jim?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"As a friend," I continued. "Did you talk with him much?"

"I didn't see it coming, if that's what you mean. Ma'am."

"We often don't with suicides," I assured him. "People expect depression, despair. Afterwards, we try to remember a telltale noose hanging from the high beam. But that's usually not the case. And do you know why?"

He blinked, watching me.

"A person is miserable, let's say. Sad and sick of being alive. Then one day, he finds the perfect solution to his terrible problems. 'I'll just kill myself,' he says. And in that moment, his miseries are cured. He can suddenly smile through his final days, knowing that every pain will soon be left behind."

Jim shook his head slowly, probably wondering if this middle-aged woman was as bat-crazy as she sounded.

"I knew Collins too," I admitted.

He sighed, looking at me with curious eyes. The two of us had something in common, it seemed.

"I'll miss him," I offered.

The man's face dipped.

Then before I could ask my next question, he looked up. "Salt Lake City," he mentioned.

"What about it?"

"How is it, ma'am?"

"Carmen," I insisted.

"Carmen."

"Salt Lake is just fine."

He said, "Good."

I waited.

He took a deep breath, drinking in the negative ions that were being generated by a filtration system stolen from NASA. Then with a trace of frustration, he admitted, "We don't get much news down here."

"I know that."

"It's hard. You can never tell what they're holding back. It's done for good reasons, I know. But we always have to wonder."

"Indian Point," I offered.

"Yeah, it was four days before we heard anything about that. And then only because somebody with clearance decided to jump protocols and tell us."

"Collins did."

"I'm not saying," he said. Which was the same as, "Yes."

"Did he explain how awful Indian Point would be?"

Jim didn't answer, carefully turning his reel two clicks.

"The reactors and storage facilities obliterated, all of those poisons thrown up by the mushroom cloud." My voice broke—an honest shattering. Then I managed to add, "I watched it all on the news. That wind carried that shit right over New York, and then Washington and Philadelphia, and all the mayhem that resulted . . ."

"Yeah," Jim whispered.

"And then to learn that it wasn't just some crude uranium bomb that killed twenty million, no. But a fat fusion monster that led straight back to Russia . . ."

With a nudge, I could have knocked Jim off his feet. Almost two years had passed, and the memory was still that raw.

I promised, "Nothing big has happened lately."

Jim needed a couple of deep breaths. "But at least . . . are things starting to simmer down?"

I shrugged. Honestly, how could anyone assess the state of our world?

"What about the wars?" he asked.

"Some are worse, some better. It just depends, Jim."

He gave me a long, studious stare. "You know what? You don't really look like a Carmen."

"I need a tall hat covered with fruit?"

"Ma'am?" he muttered, puzzled by the cultural reference.

I stepped away from the steps, allowing him enough room to escape.

But he didn't move, and with a soft, importunate voice admitted, "Some of us are wondering. What is your mission, ma'am?"

"To replace Collins."

That's what he wanted me to say, because the other possibilities were too hard to measure, and probably even more terrible.

"I'll meet our prisoner tomorrow," I confessed.

Jim nodded, trying to show nothing with his face.

"You often stand guard over Ramiro," I mentioned.

"Everybody gets that duty."

"Of course."

He glanced at the stairs.

"So what do you think about the man, Jim?"

"I don't know anything about him," he said too quickly.

I said, "Good," and left it there.

Then he added, "He seems smart, I guess. But odd."

"Odd how?"

He had a guard's burly shoulders. He used them to shrug, saying nothing else.

"I was hoping, Jim. Maybe you can help me." I paused, just for a moment. Just to let him wonder what I might say next. "What was Collins' mood when you walked him back to his apartment?"

And now the shoulders tightened, just a little.

"I saw you two on the security videos. Walking and talking."

"I was going off-duty, ma'am. Carmen."

"Collins didn't visit Ramiro again."

The young man seemed surprised. "No?"

"Didn't he see the prisoner almost every day?"

"Most days, I guess."

"But that was three days before he killed himself."

"I'll trust you on that."

"So I'm going to ask you. Officially. What was Collins' state of mind when you walked with him back to his quarters?"

Jim's eyes gazed into the past.

"Did he say anything?"

"I did most of the talking."

"Was that normal?"

"Not particularly. No, ma'am."

"You stopped at his front door for a minute," I said.

"Yeah. I guess."

"Did he show you anything, Jim?"

"Like what?"

"Papers. Something with writing on it."

"Well, Collins had his black case with him."

"But you didn't see a legal pad, or anything like that?"

Jim tried to see yellow paper, but he couldn't make himself.

"Under the blood," I said.

"What?"

"Papers got burned. Somebody incinerated them at least twice, to make sure every mark was erased."

"I didn't know that."

"How about the coin?"

"I saw that."

"Beside the bath?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"A dollar president's coin."

"I noticed it, sure."

I waited a moment. Then I said, "So you walked him and his attaché case back to his apartment. And Collins said nothing that you can remember?"

"Just . . ." Jim held his mouth closed for a moment. Then he forced himself to look at me, and with an impressive talent for mimicry, he used the dead man's voice. Deeply, with an appealingly slight Southern drawl, he said, "Want to hear something funny?"

"He asked you that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Did he tell you what was funny?"

Jim shook his head. "Which was too bad, I thought at the time. Collins was real good at jokes, when he wanted to be . . ."

**H**ealthful food and regular rest, plus years of tempered exercise, showed in the prisoner's fit body and the youthful face. He was wearing beige trousers, a clean white polo shirt and sandals that looked comfortably broken down. It was easy to confuse him for a middle-management worker in the final days of a long vacation. When he heard the reinforced door being unbolted, he stood up. Ramiro didn't seem at all surprised to find a strange woman walking into his home. "Hello," he said with a voice that had grown almost American over the years. Then he offered a warm smile and his right hand.

I introduced myself.

"A lovely name," was his response. Then the spirit of generosity took hold. He surrendered his favorite chair and asked what I would like to drink. Coffee? Tea? Or perhaps the blue Gatorade he kept cold inside his little refrigerator.

I took the chair and requested green tea.

There wasn't any stove, so he heated the water inside the microwave. Staring at the revolving mug, he told me, "It's very sad about Collins."

"It was," I agreed.

"In a sense, he was my best friend."

"This must be hard for you."

"Not particularly." Ramiro seemed to relish how cold that sounded. He pursed his lips and shrugged, giving me a momentary glance. Measuring my reaction, no doubt.

I stared at the wall behind him, gazing at an enormous photograph of the snow-clad Himalayas.

"By any chance, did you know Collins?"

I waited for a moment. Then I said, "Yes."

That delay piqued his interest. Ramiro invested the next several moments studying my face. "How well did you know him?"

I said nothing.

"Were you lovers?"

"Guess," I told him.

That earned an easy laugh. "I know you weren't."

"Why not?"

With a calm voice, he asked, "Do you like honesty, Carmen?"

"Always."

"You aren't pretty enough for Collins. Or young enough, frankly."

"Fair points," I agreed. "But how do you know this?"

"Occasionally the man would entertain me with his stories." Ramiro glanced at the mug and then stared at me. "I don't have a passionate life, I'm sure you know. But if only half of his stories were true, then the young pretties didn't have much chance against his charms."

"Local girls, were they?"

"I shouldn't say. Your fraternization rules are ridiculously strict."

I said nothing else.

Then the microwave beeped, and Ramiro set a tea bag into the plain

white mug before bringing both to me. He didn't use the handle, and when I touched the mug's body, just for an instant, my fingertips came close to burning.

He pulled his office chair out from under his little desk and sat before me, the right leg crossed over his left.

"Collins and I enjoyed some professional moments," I began. "In fact, we met long before you happened along."

He nodded, smiled.

I waited him out.

Then with a sharp grin, he mentioned, "You must be exceptionally qualified to receive this posting."

"I must be."

"May I ask a few questions?"

"By all means."

"Without giving away secrets," he began, "what kinds of experiences have you suffered during these hard years?"

"Are they hard?"

"I hear little news, and who knows if it's complete." Ramiro shrugged, laughing softly. "Which is Jefferson's idea, I think. Give the subject just enough information to tease out a few fresh, hopefully useful opinions." Then he sat back, a good-natured sigh rising out of him. "But yes, Carmen. From what I have learned, I think these times are genuinely terrible."

"Montana," I said.

"What about it?"

"The day you were found beside the road and captured . . . I was stationed outside Kabul."

When interested in any subject, Ramiro leaned forward and stopped blinking, his black eyes filling up his face. One examining physician had proposed that the microchines inside his brain were boosting his neurological capacities, and the eyes were a kind of tell. Others thought it was just a personal quirk. Whatever the reason, he was using his interested gaze on me now.

"Then the following year," I continued, "they stationed me in Iraq."

"Of course."

"I was sent to help hunt for WMDs. My assignment was to interrogate the old Baathists and such."

A thin smile surfaced; he saw the punch line coming.

"Of course there weren't any nukes or biological nightmares. But we didn't know that yet. And by 'we,' I mean the people on the ground. Washington had strung together the ridiculous intelligence, and the media beat the drums, and we went into Baghdad and kicked Saddam out of his palaces. Victory was declared. But then during that window between the celebrations and the first car bombs, my assignment shifted. That country was collapsing. Our soldiers were pretty much letting it happen, as far as I could tell. But someone gave me dozens and then hundreds of shackled bodies, plus an ever-changing checklist that made no sense to me."

My host leaned back, his chair offering a comfortable creaking. "I can appreciate your confusion."

"You understand how my game works," I said. "I try to know more than



I'd ever admit to my subject. But when it suits me, I can be very stupid. And if she gives me something . . . most of my prisoners were female, I should mention . . . if she offers some bit of intelligence that I didn't have, my first response is to say, 'Oh, yes. We know all about the cement mixer with the fertilizer bomb. You can't help yourself with that crumb of old news.'

I had shifted into my best Arabic.

Ramiro was fluent in Arabic and English, Portuguese and Spanish. But his natural tongue was an odd Creole that borrowed from each language, plus a rich seasoning of peculiar syllables and tech-terms that wouldn't exist for another hundred-plus years.

I wished I knew his native tongue. But I was too old and cranky to learn it in a workable span of time.

The prisoner stuck to his Americanized English, asking, "With that checklist, Carmen . . . what sorts of items made no sense to you?"

"Individually? Nothing was blatantly strange. But it was the whole goofy package. My bosses were hunting people who didn't belong in Baghdad. Who weren't native to Iraq, and maybe not even to the Middle East. I made some discreet inquiries, asking for clearer instructions. But nobody knew the sense behind any of our orders. One of my prisoners would eventually stand out—that's what the generals promised. She would be in her late twenties or thirties, or maybe her forties. Her accent might be wrong. Unless she was exceptionally good with languages, which was another key to watch for. There wouldn't be any genuine records showing her whereabouts more than five years earlier. And a three-star general confided to me—to all of us—that in the worst interrogations, my phantom would enjoy an extraordinary tolerance for pain and drugs and boredom. And the general promised that when I finally found my girl, she was going to be worth a hundred bloodied mistakes."

With a dismissive gesture, Ramiro said, "I told Collins. I told everybody. As a young man, I purchased a cheap package of tailored genes and various nano-organs."

"Of course."

"Common add-on talents popular in my world."

"To insultate your poor citizens from the ravages of poverty," I said, nodding agreeably.

"My warnings were explicit," Ramiro told me. "I couldn't be certain about the genetics of the other warriors, or their current identities, much less how well or how poorly they would blend into any local population."

"You gave us Iraq," I mentioned.

He bristled. Then after a moment, he said, "This is very old ground."

"It is," I agreed.

"Iraq," he repeated. "Over twenty million people, most of them young. And what percentage of that population did your colleagues and you process? One percent? Was it that much?"

"We tried our best," I claimed.

"I told Collins. One of the voices mentioned Iraq to me, in passing."

"It wasn't Abraham?"

"No, it was one of his associates. He said Iraq was our focus. But even if

that was the case, and even if Abraham and his people didn't slip out of the country before your noisy invasion . . . well, I was always critical of your clumsy methods and your very poor odds for success."

"I know. You gave Collins ample warnings."

"Even in the smallest country," said Ramiro, "there are so many dark corners in which to hide."

"You warned everybody," I said.

"And you were following orders," he said flatly. Then he added, "Carmen," with a suddenly friendly, familiar tone. "But really, how could your masters expect you to find anybody of substance?"

I paused, just for a moment. "Yes, it was a difficult assignment."

He didn't seem to notice my careful tone. "What about blood and skin?" he asked. "Were you taking samples?"

"I wasn't. But some med-techs were doing just that." I finally pulled the soggy tea bag into the air and sipped from the cooling mug. "Everybody had their own secrets to keep. Nobody knew more than a sliver of the whole incredible story. I didn't know samples were being sent back home, thousands of them, and being tested for key genes."

"Genes that might not have been there," he pointed out. "Or that could be removed or easily hidden."

I nodded. "We knew your genetic markers, sure. But who could say what we'd find inside another warrior's chromosomes?"

"Precisely."

"But what else could my people do? We were facing an unexpected threat—temporal jihadists born in a distant, treacherous future. What reasonable, effective measures would have helped our security?"

Ramiro swiped at the air.

Quietly but fiercely, he said, "I told you what I knew."

"Of course."

"Once my terms were met, I explained everything to our friend Collins." His voice rose, cracked. "Imagine that a foreign power captured the man standing guard outside my door. They would easily break him. In a few days or weeks, he would confess everything. But what is the operational knowledge of a lowly soldier? Does that man . . . my friend Jim . . . does he even halfway comprehend my importance?"

"Probably not," I conceded.

"And I'm just a simple soldier too."

"Simple? I doubt that."

A sly smile blossomed, faded. "What happened next, Carmen?"

"In 2005, I was yanked out of Iraq. I was flown back to the States and promised a new assignment. But before orders came down, they pressed me into helping with certain war games. Very secret, very obvious stuff. After the endless mess in Iraq, we were going to try to do a better job taking on Iran."

Ramiro watched me.

"Two strange things happened at that conference," I admitted. "On the first morning, I ran into a colleague on his way to a back room breakfast, and I was roped in and told to play along. It seemed like a chance deal, but of course it wasn't. There were a lot of strange faces sitting with eggs

and oatmeal. And there was Collins. I hadn't seen that man in ages. God, I thought, he looked tired and pale. But he practically latched onto me. We sat together. This other fellow sat in the corner, watching the two of us. I think we managed maybe five minutes of catch-up. I told him about coming home. He gave me a cover story, but he didn't bothering pushing it too hard. Then one of the unknown faces, a guy sitting at the end of the table, threw out this odd, odd question."

Ramiro leaned forward, absorbing my face and soul with a blinkless gaze.

"What if you could jump back in time?" the gentleman inquired. He was pretending that his question wasn't serious, that it was for shits-and-giggles only. He made himself laugh, asking, 'What if you and some like-minded friends gathered together? Say there's a few dozen of you, a couple hundred at most. You're going to travel back in time together. But there are rules. You can cover only one or two centuries, and with restrictions. Your journey has to be a one-way. You can carry only a limited amount of mass. Bodies and a little luggage and that's all. There won't be any return missions to the future. There's no supply train with fresh M-16s and laptops. And your goal? You want to conquer that more primitive world, of course. You are invaders. Two hundred soldiers armed with your beliefs and training and your superior knowledge, and you'll have to find some clever way to make your little force strong enough to defeat the old horse armies."

Ramiro smiled.

"Of course there was a purpose to his wacky scenario," I allowed. "That much was obvious to everybody there. But the gentleman didn't offer explanations. For all I know, he was told that our own physicists had just built a time machine, and we were trying to decide what to do with our new toy. The truth never had to get in the way. During a five-hour breakfast, he led a clumsy, half-informed discussion that ended up with tactical nukes burning up London and Paris. And do you know why this happened? I think the show was put on for Collins' benefit. To give him ideas, to help guide his future conversations with you. And meanwhile in those other rooms, the future Iranian war ran its imaginary, surgical course."

The prisoner had leaned forward, elbows on knees. Then he revealed something of his ability—his clear focus, his absolute mastery of detail—when he said, "Earlier, Carmen. When you admitted that your Iraqi assignment was difficult. I had the impression—tell me if I'm wrong—but it seemed to me that despite some very long odds, you were successful."

I said, "I was."

"You found a suspect? Somebody out of place in our world, did you?"

"Yes." I paused. "A young woman without family. With no paper trail reaching back more than a few years. She claimed to have worked as a lab technician, nothing more, and she had reasonable explanations for the gaps in her records. But she was the right age, and she was very, very tough. I worked her and worked her, and the only information I got from her was the name of a river in Kashmir."

Ramiro stared at me.

"At least that's what others heard when they listened to the interroga-

tion later." I shrugged, glancing down. "I couldn't tell you what she was saying exactly, since she was throwing up at the time. But two days later, a special ops group came and took her away."

My new friend smiled. Then after a moment or two, he guessed, "Collins told you this news at the breakfast, did he?"

"Later, actually."

"You had uncovered one of my sisters. Is that what he told you?"

"Not in those terms. But Collins took me out for drinks and mentioned that my girl was interrogated by other teams, and when she finally talked, she admitted to pretty much everything."

"Very good," he said.

I kept my voice as level and cool as I could manage it. "Collins told me that she was a holy soldier in a war that hadn't seen its first shot yet. But that day was coming soon, he confided. And my prisoner . . . that young woman . . . had promised that our world would be helpless before this mighty hand."

Ramiro watched me sip the tea. "Collins never mentioned the girl to me."

"That's the way it should be," I said.

"Of course."

Then I leaned forward. "I asked about her."

Ramiro waited.

"I asked Collins if she was still being helpful to us."

"Was she?"

"Not anymore. Since she managed to kill herself."

A doll's eyes would have been more expressive. Very calmly, he asked, "A suicide implant, was it?"

"No," I said. "She slammed her forehead into the corner of a desk, breaking a blood vessel in her cortex." I set down the cold mug of tea, adding, "But now you know why I'm so highly regarded, at least in some circles. I've had some measure of success at this very odd game."

5

**T**o do this job, you need an iron ass. The capacity to sit and listen, nodding with enthusiasm, and remembering everything said while measuring every pause—that's what matters. Find the inconsistencies, and you can be good at it. Connect this phrase to that sigh, and you'll earn your paycheck. What years of experience have shown me is that inflicting pain and the threat of pain are rarely necessary. It takes remarkably little to coax the average soul into revealing everything. Extramarital affairs. Cheating on critical exams. Dangerous politics. Some years ago, during a commercial flight, I sat beside a lovely old lady who spoke at length about cooking and her husband and her cherished garden, which she described in some detail, and then she mentioned her husband again. For a moment, she paused, looking in my direction but seeing something else. Then she quietly admitted that the poor man was beginning to suffer

from dementia. It was that pause that caught my attention. It was the careful tone of her voice and the way her steely green eyes stared through a stranger's head. Afterwards, on a whim, I checked with a botanical guide and learned that an astonishing portion of her beautiful garden was poisonous. She never said an evil word about anyone, including that senile old man, but her intentions were obvious. She had made up her mind to kill him, and she was simply waiting for the excuse to use garden shears and a cooking pot, summoning Death.

But my subjects are never ordinary citizens. As a rule, they consider themselves to be special—committed, determined warriors in whatever grand cause has latched hold of their worthy souls. But their passions are larger than ours, their enthusiasms having few bounds. Rock music makes them pray. Cattle prods and mock executions are exactly what great men expect to endure. But if you treat them as fascinating equals, they will happily chatter on, sometimes for years, explaining far more to you than you ever hoped to know.

For twelve years, Collins sat inside a very comfortable prison cell, listening to one man's self-obsessed monologue.

Thousands of hours of autobiography begged to be studied. But I didn't have the time. Even the summaries made for some massive volumes. I had to make do with an elaborate timeline marked with every kind of event found in one man's life. According to my briefings, the enigmatic Ramiro was born in the second decade of the twenty-second century. His family had some small wealth. The paternal grandfather was a Spaniard who had converted to the Sunni faith before immigrating to Brazil, and the boy was raised in a city that didn't yet exist today—a sugar cane and palm oil center in what was once Amazon rainforest. A maternal uncle was responsible for Ramiro's interest in astronomy. Lemonade-7 was preparing for a long, successful career as some type of scientist, but at a critical juncture, politics ruined his dreams. At least that's the story that Collins heard again and again. The entire family was thrown into sudden, undeserved poverty. At seventeen, the young Islamic man had to drop out of school and find any work. At eighteen, when he was a legal adult, he bought a cheap package of poverty genes and nanoplants to help insulate him from his miseries; but, unlike many, Ramiro resisted any treatment that would make him happy in these decidedly joyless days.

People want to believe that in another twenty or fifty or one hundred years, the earth will grow into an enduring utopia. But among the prisoner's unwelcome gifts was a narrow, knife-deep vision of a disturbingly recognizable world. Yes, science would learn much that was new and remarkable. And fabulous technologies would be put to hard work. But cheap fusion was always going to need another couple decades of work, and eternal health was always for the next generation to achieve, and by the twenty-second century, the space program would have managed exactly two walks on the Martian surface and a few permanent, very exclusive homes hunkered down near the moon's south pole.

Ramiro's world was ours, except with more people and less naivety. Most of its wealth and all of its power was concentrated in the top one-half percentile. National borders would shift here and vanish there, but

the maps would remain familiar. The old religions would continue struggling for converts, often through simple, proven violence. But the Islamic Century would have come to its natural end. Mormons and Buddhists and Neo-secularists began to gradually gnaw away at their gains. And in the backwaters of Brazil, young Ramiro's faith would seem quite out of place—another liability in his sorry, increasingly desperate prospects.

But then a team of physicists working in the Kashmir Free State would build and successfully test the world's first time machine.

"I can't believe that," Collins had blurted out.

Perhaps the prisoner was a little irritated by his interrogator's tone. There were many moments, early on especially, when Ramiro displayed a thin skin. But then he made a smile break out, dragging his mood into a sunnier place, and with a tight proud voice, he asked, "And how did I come here?"

"This is about me, not you," Collins replied. "I'm just having trouble accepting this preposterous concept."

"You want details, do you?"

"I want the science. At least enough to show around and get a few smart-sounding opinions."

"Of course." The smile warmed. "I assumed this would happen."

This was the first interview inside the new salt-mine prison. Despite a self-induced coronary, Ramiro looked fit and comfortable. His room was finished, but little else was done. Despite copious amounts of soundproofing, the deep drumming of machinery bled into the audio track—the Army Corps working fast on what they were told was a new secret shelter for the wise heads of their elected government.

"Paper and a pen," Ramiro demanded.

I wasn't the first to notice that while making important notes, our time traveler preferred ancient, proven tools.

He wrote hard for half an hour, breaking only to mention that he was by no means an expert in this esoteric branch of science.

Neither was Collins. But that little bald character had done just enough reading to decipher a few equations and recognize the general shape of the diagrams. With a nod and a poker player's guts, he said, "This looks like you're playing with the Casimir Effect."

"Very good," Ramiro responded.

"Parallel plates set so close together that they tap into the vacuum energies everywhere. Is that about right?"

"Something like that, yes."

"I've heard there's a lot of energy in a vacuum. Virtual particles and structure too." Flipping through the pages, Collins allowed the overhead camera to record everything. "So what are you doing on this page? Making a wormhole?"

"Hardly."

"Doesn't time travel need a wormhole?"

Ramiro sat back. "That's a very difficult trick to achieve. And in the end, unnecessary."

"Why?"

"A pocket of Lorton Energy is far easier to make."



"Who's Lorton?"

"An unborn Australian genius, if that matters. In my day, he was just as famous for his piano playing as for his peculiar physics." Then Ramiro launched into a lengthy and occasionally self-contradictory lecture about exotic states and branes and the means by which modest energies can throw matter across years and entire eons. But there were strict limits to the magic. The larger the mass to be moved, the shorter span it could cross. A substantial building might be thrown several years into the past, while a tiny grain of sand could find itself resting in the sultry Jurassic.

"Is that how they tested their machine?" Collins asked. "Make a probe and send it back, then dig it up in a fossil bed somewhere?"

Ramiro's smile flickered.

"Hardly," he said.

"Wait," his interrogator said. "I forgot. You told me already . . . what was it you told me. . . ?"

"The universe is a quantum phenomena," Ramiro mentioned.

"Which means?"

"Your physicists have played with a very difficult concept. They call it the many-worlds reality, and to an amazing degree, that model is correct. Everything that can happen will happen. An unstable nucleus might explode today or in a thousand years, which means that if it detonates both events will happen. And it also explodes during every nanosecond between now and then. In our astonishing, endlessly inventive universe, every possible outcome is inevitable. Every consequence plays out endlessly. The most unlikely event happens too often to count. And possibility is as easy and perfect as the great thoughts that pass through God's good mind."

Collins was a natural actor. But many years later, watching the interrogation, I could tell that he was impressed. It wasn't play-acting on his part. This was no feigned emotion for effect. The camera showed an awestruck gaze and hands that had to find one another, wrapping their fingers into an elaborate knot. Collins was pleased. No, he was thrilled. For a moment or two, he allowed himself to stare at the stack of papers in his lap, humble and unexpected, and in ways that few people can ever know, he felt honored.

Then he remembered his job—his duty—and quickly returned to the scruffy matters of state and war.

"Okay, it's 1999," he said. "In one reality, nobody jumps back to our day. Nothing changes, and the world pushes on exactly as before. Lorton is going to be born and stroke the keys and play with his mathematics—"

"Exactly."

"But there's this other 1999," said Collins.

"Yes."

"Abraham and you, and the rest of the group . . . they calmly step out into our world. Is that about it?"

"Except that process was never calm," Ramiro mentioned. "There was a crack like thunder and quite a lot of dust. Since they occupied a fair amount of space, your native air and ground had to be pushed out of the way."

"Naturally."

Ramiro waited.

"Where?" Collins asked.

Then as Ramiro began to speak, his interrogator interrupted, saying, "I know. It's in Kashmir. You've mentioned that before."

"It was beside the Shyok River."

"The Shyok? Are you sure?"

"Of course I am sure," said Ramiro, bristling slightly.

"And how many came?"

"One hundred and ninety-nine warriors," Ramiro reported.

"You're sure?"

"I didn't count the bodies. But that number was mentioned to me."

"Is that how much mass can be thrown back across one hundred and forty years? About two hundred men's worth?"

"Men and women."

"How many women?"

"I don't know."

"Because of the masks. You claim."

The first interrogation had delivered that sour news. Collins had wanted Abraham's description, but Ramiro couldn't identify any of the temporal jihadists. Every head was covered with a thick black fabric. It was a miraculous cloth, transparent to the person beneath but hiding the faces from the outside world. And if that wasn't terrible enough, the cloth also wiped away the character and even the gender of every voice.

"Very smart," Collins.

Ramiro nodded agreeably.

"And your leader, this Abraham fellow—"

"I never saw his face. But please, ask me that question twenty more times. I love repeating myself without end."

"Sorry," Collins said.

Ramiro waited for a few moments. Then he thought to mention, "We also brought a few personal effects and some special equipment too."

"I have to ask this again," Collins said. "My bosses insist."

"As I told you, I can offer only guesses about what kind of equipment was included. My cell was small, and it was not responsible for any of it. I saw some anonymous packing crates. Nothing more."

"A reasonable step," Collins allowed.

Both men sat quietly.

"Again," the interrogator said. "What can you tell me about Abraham?"

The biography was brief and chilling. Abraham was the only known name for a young gentleman who according to rumors was born into one of the world's wealthiest families. He had invested ten years and his personal fortune preparing for an invasion of the past. What Ramiro knew was minimal, and he openly admitted that he might have been fed lies. But the heart of the plan was for the invaders to come with little but make friends with a useful government, and then they would fabricate the kinds of weapons that would bring this primitive world to their leader's feet.

Ramiro patiently told the story again, and then his interrogator suddenly interrupted.

"Wait, I know," Collins blurted. "It's the future."

"Pardon me?"

"That's how they tested their time machine." He shook the papers in the air. "If they threw a probe into the past, it would only create a new reality. A separate earth diverging from us. But if they had a marked, one-of-a-kind object . . . and then let's say they sent it a minute or a day into the future . . . then according to this quantum craziness, that probe would appear in every reality leading out from this scruffy little moment of ours."

"Exactly," said Ramiro, smiling like a long-suffering but proud teacher.

"That's how your physicists proved it?"

"Grains of marked sand were sent two moments into the future," said Ramiro.

"Huh," said Collins.

The prisoner sat back in his chair.

"Which makes me wonder," Collins continued.

Silence.

Then Collins sat back.

"What are you wondering, my friend?"

"What would happen?" The interrogator lifted his hand, holding an imaginary ball before his gaze. "If you had a time machine, and you happened to throw, I don't know, a couple hundred lumps of U-235 ahead in time? If you sent one of them every minute or so, but you aimed them to appear in exactly the same place, at the same exact moment...all of that nuclear material pumped into the same tiny volume . . . what kind of boom would that make. . .?"

I watched those ripe moments at least half a dozen times before I was sure of what I had seen. For an instant, the prisoner flinched. His heart kicked slightly, and the sweat came a little faster than before. But what held my interest was Ramiro's face, and in particular, how guarded he acted for the next little while.

"I will have to be careful," he was thinking.

"This man is sharp," I could imagine him warning himself. "Sharp and quick, and I need to watch my steps."

## 6

**"A** good day's work?"

"Reasonably exceptional."

Jefferson nodded, and then he smiled. Then after careful consideration, he decided not to mention what was foremost on his mind. "How's the lamb?" he asked instead.

"Delicious."

"And the rest?"

"Everything's wonderful," I told him. "Thanks again for the invitation."

Jefferson's efficiency apartment was the same as everyone else's, except for every flourish and individual oddity that he had impressed on its

walls and floor and the serviceable, government-issue furnishings. Either his housekeeping was thorough, or he had changed his nature for me. He had a fondness for Impressionist painters and political thrillers. The worn carpet implied a man who liked to pace, possibly while talking on the phone. Only two people were allowed to communicate directly with the outside world, and even then, we had to accept some inflexible restrictions. Every image that entered or left the prison, and even the most ordinary sound, had to be examined by several layers of elaborate software. Hidden messages were the main justification. Ramiro might have secret talents; who knew what any of his microscopic implants really did? Those security measures gave voices a half-second delay, and the news broadcasts were delayed for nearly thirty minutes before they dripped their way down to us.

Jefferson's small television was perched on the kitchen counter, muted and presently turned to CNN. Not sure what to say, he glanced at the images coming out of China. I preferred to invest my next few moments staring at his Monet—a good quality reproduction, matted and framed above the sofa bed. Then I set down my fork and knife, and after wiping the juice from the corner of my mouth, I quietly announced, "You know, I don't like him."

Jefferson turned back to me, trying to guess my intentions.

"Lemonade-7," I said.

"I know who you mean."

Picking up my fork again, I showed him a serious, sober expression. "There's something about that man . . . I don't exactly know what . . . but it's just wrong . . ."

Jefferson risked a neutral nod.

"Control," I said.

"Pardon me?"

"He demands it," I said.

"Of course he wants control."

"And he does an amazing job holding on to it."

Jefferson shrugged. "In small ways, he does."

I said nothing.

"But he's still our prisoner. That never changes. Beyond our assurances to keep him secret and safe from harm, what can he count on?"

"Not much," I agreed. But then I asked, "But what has he given us in these last five or six years? What do we have that's genuinely new?"

With the tips of two fingers, Jefferson scratched his short white beard.

"Does he offer any fresh insights now? Is he able to make any one of our wars a little less terrible?"

"You know how it is, Carmen."

"Remind me."

"The well always runs dry."

"With our sources, you mean."

"Of course."

"So why did Collins remain here?"

A good poker face reveals nothing, except that it is a poker face. Which is a useful clue in itself.

"Collins was better than anybody," I said. "Nobody else understood the minds and makeup of these time travelers. So why didn't he step out into the world, take a new post, and use his hard-earned skills to interrogate fresh suspects?"

"Ramiro was his boy."

"I understand that."

"And honestly, I didn't want to lose Collins," he said.

"Thanks for being honest."

Jefferson shifted in his chair. "Maybe you're right," he allowed. "Looking back, I suppose we might have gotten more good out of Collins."

"I was scouring the world for Abraham," I pointed out.

Hearing the name, Jefferson blinked.

"It's just that nobody bothered to tell me who Abraham was or how many people he had with him, much less what these temporal jihadists were trying to do. There were so many layers of security that responsible, effective work was impossible."

"Why should I defend policies I didn't make?"

"I did piece a few things together for myself," I mentioned. "At least to the point where I knew there was something deadlier than al-Qaeda, a powerful and hateful and almost invisible organization, and it could be anywhere in the world, and I shouldn't trust anybody completely."

The bureaucrat fell back on his instincts. "Knowing what you know now, Carmen . . . do you really believe that you should have been told?"

I didn't react.

"And everybody else with high clearances too? Should hundreds and thousands have been brought into the club?"

I gave the Monet another glance.

Jefferson bristled. "This operation has had its share of leaks over the years. Sure, most came from higher up. But I know of three incidents tied to this facility. And we could be on the far side of the moon, as isolated as we are. So what happens if we brief everybody who might like to know about Ramiro? In thirty seconds, nothing will be secret, and in ten minutes, we'll have forfeited what might be our only advantage."

The fork had grown warm in my hand. "If it's an advantage," I replied, "why aren't we enjoying some real success?"

"You don't think we are?"

I shook my head.

"We've done a marvelous job of undercutting Abraham," he told me. "And since he's our main enemy, I think I should feel proud of my work here."

I stifled a bleak little laugh.

He noticed. Outrage blossomed, and a tight voice said, "I shouldn't have to defend myself or my people." Which was the kind of noise you make when defending everybody. "Before you take that tone with me, perhaps we should both remember what our prisoner—this man who you do not like—has given us."

Then I smiled and nodded. "My parents live in Seattle," I mentioned.

"Exactly. Yes!"

Two years ago, government geologists announced that low rumblings

beneath the Pacific were precursors to a substantial earthquake. It was a bogus operation, but well staged. As a precaution, everyone in the Pacific Northwest was told to step outside before 10:30 in the morning, and the highways were closed down, and the airlines stopped landing and taking off. Sixteen minutes later, an 8.0 trembler hit western Washington, and it might have killed thousands. But instead of a mauling, only a few dozen perished and a few billion dollars in infrastructure fell down—almost a nonevent, considering these recent years.

"Seattle is the perfect example," Jefferson said.

Ramiro had given us the dates and epicenters for dozens of future eruptions and earthquakes. But I wasn't the first voice to ask, "What kind of person carries those kinds of tidbits inside his head?"

Jefferson gave his beard another good scratch.

"An amateur astronomer might remember exploding stars," I agreed. "But tectonic events too?"

"The man is brilliant," Jefferson declared. "You've seen his test scores. Those extra genes and his buried machinery give him nearly perfect recall—a skill, I'll add, that he has kept secret from us."

"Seattle didn't hurt his reputation, either," I pointed out.

Jefferson needed to look elsewhere. So he glanced at the television, but whatever he saw there didn't seem to comfort him.

"I wish he'd given us more," I mentioned.

"He can't do the weather," Jefferson replied. "Hurricanes are chaotic, and the Butterfly Effects—"

"I don't mean weather." Shaking my head, I asked, "What about the tsunami off Sumatra?"

"Which one?"

"The worst one," I said. "The day after Christmas, in '04."

His shoulders squared. "That wasn't my call."

"But you recommended caution," I pointed out. "I read Collins' full report. He asked for some kind of warning to be released. But you didn't want us to 'give away the store.' Did I get the cliché right?"

Beneath the white whiskers, sun-starved flesh grew red.

Again, Jefferson said, "It wasn't my decision."

"I realize that."

"In those days, we couldn't fake this kind of knowledge. Any intervention on our part could have exposed our source."

"A quarter of a million dead," I said. "And mostly Muslim, too."

He wouldn't let me drag him down this path. With a snort, he said, "You have no idea how difficult this has been."

"Tell me."

He wanted to do just that.

"Please," I said.

But caution took hold, and Jefferson's mouth disappeared inside the coarse whiskers.

"Is Ramiro real?"

Jefferson didn't seem to hear me. He bent forward, staring at his own half-eaten dinner. Then quietly and fiercely, he said, "A lot of brilliant people have spent years wondering just that."



"He's a lowly soldier," I mentioned. "The lowliest of all, he claims." Silence.

"So what was Ramiro doing in Montana? Is it the story that he tells? That he was a delivery boy bringing one little piece of an ultramodern bomb into our helpless nation?"

Jefferson gave the television another try.

"Maybe he is a genius, and maybe he came from the future. But the poor bastard didn't know how to drive on ice, did he?"

"Few Brazilians do," Jefferson snapped.

I showed him a narrow, might-mean-anything smile.

"Do you think that the crash was staged?" he finally asked me.

"It has to cross my mind," I allowed.

"Which means Ramiro was sent here, and he's supposed to feed us all the wrong information. Is that what you're thinking?"

I sat back, and I sighed.

"Okay, I'll tell you why Collins stayed right here." Jefferson straightened his back, and he took a deep breath. "Out in the world, what are the odds of finding a second Ramiro? They're minimal at best. Collins would have bounced from one hotspot to another, wasting his skills. But he remained here instead, playing the patience game, waiting for one of you to stumble across a genuine candidate. We had a good plan in place, Carmen. The new prisoner would be brought here and thoroughly interrogated by Collins, and when the time was right, Ramiro would be allowed to meet with him, or her."

"I once found a suspect," I mentioned.

Jefferson remained silent.

"A young woman in Baghdad."

He allowed that statement to simmer. Then with keen pleasure, he said, "You know the old story about Stalin, don't you? One evening, the dictator can't find his favorite pipe, and his first assumption is that it has been stolen. So he demands a full investigation. But the next morning, Stalin realizes that he simply set the pipe in a different drawer, and he admits as much to the head of his secret police. To Beria. Which leads to a very uncomfortable silence. Then Beria clears his throat, admitting that three men have already confessed to stealing the missing item."

I showed surprise. "What? Are you claiming that my girl wasn't real?"

"I've seen all of the files on her. And everybody else who looked good, at one time or another." Jefferson couldn't help but lean across the tiny table, saying, "When your prisoner broke, she confessed to every suggestion that was thrown her way. Give her enough time, and I think we could have convicted her for a thousand crimes, including stealing Stalin's pipe."

I said nothing. Pretending that this was unwelcome news, I chewed on my bottom lip and refused to look him in the eyes.

"We've had dozens of candidates in the pipeline," Jefferson claimed. "But none ever reached a point of real interest to us."

"Too bad," I whispered.

"Your girl was unique because she managed to kill herself. That's what kept her apparent value high. At least back in Washington, it did."

I was silent.

"By the way, did you ever see the autopsy results? They took her apart cell by cell, basically, and not one tiny, futuristic machine was found. Just some oddities in the blood and gut, that's all."

"I tortured an innocent woman? Is that that what you're saying?"

Jefferson gave me a moment to dwell on that sorry prospect. I think that if I'd asked for a tissue, he would have leaped up to help this naïve and disappointing creature.

"We have hard jobs," he finally said.

I got up from the dinner table.

"For what it's worth," he began. Then he hesitated before adding, "Carmen," with a warm tone.

"What?" I asked.

"Collins had a lot of sleepless nights, dealing with all the possibilities."

I walked past him, standing close enough to the Monet that the water lilies turned into unrecognizable blobs of pink and white.

After a minute, I asked quietly, "How many times?"

Jefferson was chewing the lamb. He had to swallow before responding. "How many times what?"

"These unrecorded conversations," I said, my eyes still focused on the gorgeous, senseless painting.

I heard him turn in his chair.

I asked, "When did the secret interrogations begin?"

He decided to stand. "What interrogations?"

"Sometimes Collins disabled the microphones and cameras before entering the prisoner's quarters." I turned, showing Jefferson my best stony face. "I know it because I've checked the logs and other forms. Nine times in the last six years, some odd software error has caused the complete dumping of everything that happened between Collins and Ramiro."

Jefferson considered his options.

I said, "These are very convenient blunders, or they are intentional acts of treason."

"No," said Jefferson.

"No?"

"Those interviews were Collins' idea. But I okayed them."

"Why?"

Too late, the man began to wonder if I was playing a game. "I don't think I need to remind you, miss. I have the authority."

"You do," I agreed.

"And I'll tell you this: Despite what you might believe, Ramiro continued to offer us help. Valuable, even critical insights. And we were justifiably scared of using the normal pipeline for that kind of news."

"Name one insight," I said.

He refused to respond.

"I do have the authority to demand an answer, sir."

"What if another nation has captured one of Abraham's people?" Jefferson posed the question and then shuddered. "It's sobering to consider. Another power, possibly one of our enemies, is keeping somebody like Ramiro in their own deep, secret hole—"

"What else?"

He winced.

"Give me your worst nightmare," I demanded.

"I'm sure you can guess that."

"All right," I said. "After many years in prison, Ramiro happens to mention, 'Oh, by the way, my basic assumptions might have been wrong from the beginning. Maybe Abraham isn't looking for a cooperative Middle Eastern country. Maybe his sights are focused on a wealthier, much more advanced nation.'" I laughed sadly. "That isn't the sort of news you'd cherish sending up the pipeline, is it?"

Jefferson studied me, once more trying to decide what I really was, and just how adept I might be.

"That last session with Ramiro," I began.

Squaring his shoulders made Jefferson's belly stick out.

"I can't find any recording of the interview. Is that right?"

"There isn't any," he conceded.

I couldn't decide if he was lying.

"Collins didn't share any details with you. Did he?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Because when there was important news, he always came straight to you. But that night, he walked home with Jim." I used a suspicious smile, pointing out, "Or maybe there was important news. But he knew that his audience would never accept whatever he was carrying with him."

Jefferson looked up and to his right.

I glanced at his television, just for a moment. The civil war in China seemed quite small and smoky, a few pain-wracked bodies flicking in and out of existence, a single tank burning in an anonymous street.

At last, Jefferson asked me, "What exactly is your assignment here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked.

Then he laughed—a miserable, sickly utterance—and with a tone of confession, he said, "Oh, shit . . . that's what I thought."

## 7

"I've seen your arrival site."

"Have you?"

"Not physically, no," I confessed. "And even if I had the chance, I think I would pass on it today."

"Reasonable of you."

I stopped walking.

Ramiro took two more steps before pausing. His exercise yard was long and narrow, defined by brownish green walls, and for no discernable reason, his potted plants were healthier than those in the public avenues. Standing between vigorous umbrella trees, he watched my mouth, my eyes.

"Kashmir," I said.

He decided to offer a narrow, unreadable smile.

"You couldn't know this, but some years ago, I was able to walk on the

Indian side of the disputed region. It wasn't a long visit, but I came away with the impression that Kashmir was one of the most beautiful and most dangerous places in my world."

My comments earned an agreeable nod.

"Did Collins tell you? Various teams have visited the Shyok River."

"He mentioned that, and I'm sure you know that."

"Tough work, those people had. Trying to verify the unthinkable, and doing it in what was a low-grade war zone. That first survey team was tiny and ignorant. They went in fast and flew out again on the same day, pockets full of soil samples and photographs. But the evidence was plain. Something energetic had happened there. The toppled trees and soil profiles were odd, and obvious. So we came up with a workable cover story, a fable that allowed us to move around the area, and when it was absolutely necessary, involve Pakistani Intelligence."

Ramiro's eyes remained wide open.

"But that second team didn't know what the hunt was for either. Our top people were told not to ask for specifics, but to always watch for details that seemed out of place."

"You said you'd been to the site," Ramiro mentioned.

"By VR means." I placed both hands over my eyes, pretending to wear the cumbersome mask. "Those agents came home with high-density images. I learned about them when I was first briefed about you, and I demanded to be given the chance to walk the site."

"Did you learn anything?"

"Much," I mentioned.

He waited.

"Knowing nothing, I might have guessed that some passing god had sneezed. A perfect circle of ground, big enough for a couple hundred people, had been swept clear. Locals had already carted away most of the downed trees, but there was enough debris to give a sense of what the scene had looked like. That second team dug a trench, took its pictures, and then covered everything up again." I drew a vertical line with a finger. "A little more than a hand's length underground, the old soil was waiting. It looked a little like shale. But according to the data, what was under that line was identical to the soil sitting straight above it. And by identical, I mean the same. Pebble for pebble, sand grain for sand grain."

"The Lorton Energy was shaped carefully," he said.

"Seventy feet across, eight feet tall."

He nodded.

"I like studying the weird crap that they found in the soil. Do you know what I mean? The nano debris, the occasional busted machine part. Little stuff that we couldn't make today, even if we wanted to."

"There would have been more debris," he mentioned. "Except our clothes and bodies were thoroughly cleaned before."

"Smart," I said.

He waited.

"Of course we needed Pakistani help," I admitted. "There was no way to poke around their side of the disputed border without being noticed. And since they happened to be our loyal allies in the war on terror, at least for

the moment, we invented some very scary intelligence about an armed group, possibly Indian radicals, who had slipped across the border in '99. Our mutual enemies had carried gold and guns, and to help explain all the sampling, maybe enough radionuclides to build a few dirty bombs. They would have been on foot, we told our allies. And they might have had odd accents. Then we asked for help interviewing the local people, trying to find anybody who remembered strangers passing through three years before."

"Some remembered," said Ramiro.

I waited.

"Collins mentioned as much."

"Stories about strangers, yes." I started to walk again, and Ramiro fell in beside me. "I haven't gone over all the testimonies. Just a few summaries, that's all I've had time for. But there were witnesses on the local farms, and more in a couple of nearby towns. Exactly what you'd expect if a large group of quiet pedestrians had come in the night and quickly scattered across the landscape."

"Most of us hid," he said.

"Naturally."

"A few were dispatched to secure transportation."

"Those who would blend in best, I'll assume."

"I assume the same."

"You and your little cell hunkered down together."

With Ramiro beside me, I was keenly aware of how much taller he was.

"In a woodlot by the water," he said.

"And Abraham?"

"I don't know where he was."

"I wouldn't believe you if you claimed otherwise."

Silence.

"After all, you're just a convert who got lucky. You weren't scheduled to join the invasion. But at the last moment, one of the chosen warriors fell ill—"

"My friend."

"The German, your benefactor. Sure. He cleared your entry into Abraham's group. And when he couldn't make the trip, you did in his place."

My companion held his gait to the end of the room, and then with the precision of a big zoo cat, he turned and started back again.

"I have a question about the German."

"Yes?"

"But first, let's talk a little more about Kashmir."

"Whatever you want, Carmen."

"Even our crude virtual-reality technologies make it beautiful."

"Our arrival site was lovely," he agreed.

"Seeing the mountains and that glacial river . . . it made me sad to think about what's happened to it since."

He waited.

I said, "Sad," once again.

"And I am sorry," Ramiro volunteered.

"For what? You told us what you knew, and we acted on it. You had to

pass through Kashmir because that's where the only substantial time machine existed in your day. Point-to-point transfer is the way time travel is done. And it was your German pal who claimed that Abraham would center his operation inside Iraq. Because they had industry and an educated middle class, he said. Because of a greedy dictator and a useful secret service. Abraham planned to approach Saddam with the fantastic truth, and if the Baathists cooperated, there would be riches beyond all measure."

"Iraq was a disappointment," he allowed.

I nodded in agreement.

We had crossed the room again, stopping short of the door—a heavy metal door with thick glass on top, a single guard watching us from the other side.

"I was surprised," Ramiro admitted. "I expected that you'd find a good deal of physical evidence."

"We did find some lost nanos in warehouses, and a diamond screwdriver out in the oil fields."

He shook his head slowly. "Perhaps you understand why I don't like these people."

"They manipulated you."

His pace lifted, just slightly. And his hands swung the weights just a little harder.

"Then we bombed Iran hard. And goaded Israel into mangling Syria for us."

We walked until the room ended, and like two cats, we turned and walked back in our own tracks.

"Two more disappointing wars," I muttered.

He pointed out, "Your leaders made those decisions. I was very honest. I would have handled these conflicts differently."

"I know."

Then he said, "Pakistan."

I waited.

"That was a possibility I mentioned to Collins." His tone was frustrated. He sounded like a proud man who had suffered a public embarrassment. "Very early in our relationship, even before you reached Baghdad, I suggested to Collins that my people might gravitate to the nearest compliant government."

"Except the Pakistanis were our friends. And we had close, close ties with Musharraf."

Ramiro smiled. "Do you trust anyone, Carmen?"

I waved the question aside. "But of course Pakistani Intelligence—our partners on the ground—was full of ambitious souls."

"That's true."

"The future that we should have lived could have been very instructive. Somebody like Abraham, setting his sights on potential allies, might identify the name and address of a young captain who would have eventually ruled his empire. A fledgling Napoleon with connections and toxic ambitions. Leave him alone for another twenty or thirty years, and he would have earned his power. But patience isn't common in would-be em-



perors. A man like that would surely look at the temporal jihadists as gifts from God."

"Collins and I discussed the Pakistan possibility. In addition to several other scenarios."

"I want to talk about Pakistan."

"Of course."

"Do you know why we hit it next?"

He took a moment before shaking his head.

"What did Collins tell you?"

"Its government was on the brink of collapse," he said. "A powerful bomb was detonated in Islamabad, and a peculiar device was found in the wreckage. Collins brought the object to me, to ask my opinion."

"I haven't seen the device myself," I admitted. "From what I hear, it's sitting in a vault under the Pentagon." And for a thousand years, that's where it would remain, protected by the radioactive nightmares from Indian Point.

Ramiro lifted one of his weights, remarking, "It is about this size, but hollow. Cylindrical and composed of intricate nanostructures that give it some interesting properties."

"Juice it up with electricity," I mentioned, "and it turns invisible."

"I gave a demonstration."

"The machine has a structural flaw and can't be used. You claimed. But if it functions, it could play a critical role in the construction of a portable, low-energy time machine."

Ramiro lowered the weight, saying nothing.

"I trust everyone I know," I mentioned.

He glanced at me, his gaze curious. Alert.

"What I trust is that people will always be people. They will do what they want, and when you search for motives, rationality proves to be a luxury. Fear and love and hatred: those are the emotions that count for something. And everything that involves us comes naturally from our human beast."

"A reasonable philosophy," he replied.

"What if Abraham was busily fabricating a new time machine?"

Ramiro said nothing.

"Our nightmare kept getting worse and worse," I continued. "By then, we had a new president. A chance for fresh beginnings. But what if our enemies were trying to cobble together a small, workable time machine? They could bring it into our country and drive it wherever they wanted to go, and with modest amounts of power, they could aim at the future, launching the makings of bombs. It was just like Collins suggested early on, wasn't it? The jihadists could launch atomic bombs or the ingredients for a chemical attack." My voice picked up momentum. "We wouldn't have any defense. Deadly, unbeatable weapons sent through time, invisible to us now. This moment. Abraham's people could travel from city to city, and ten years from today, at a predetermined instant, our entire country would be wiped clean off the earth."

We paused, turned.

"That's what they made me read," I confessed. "After I got my chance to

walk beside a beautiful virtual river, that apocalyptic scenario was shown to me."

Ramiro nodded.

"Of course we went into Pakistan," I said. "I would have attacked, in an instant. Any responsible president would have been compelled to do nothing less. Because Abraham might have been hiding in Islamabad or Karachi, probably in some baby potentate's guest room, and we had to do something. Didn't we? Another little war, another stack of wreckage to poke through. But maybe we'd find enough this time, the kinds of evidence to show us where to go next, and who to hit next, and maybe even get a prisoner or two worth interrogating."

Ramiro let me pass into the lead.

"Pricks," I muttered. Then I slowed and looked up at him, saying, "It's too bad about India. Too bad. But a few dozen nukes dropped into their cities is a lot better than total oblivion for us."

My companion slowed, almost stopping, and with a patient, almost soothing voice, he asked, "What about the German?"

"Your friend?"

"You had a question about him," Ramiro reminded me.

I stopped altogether. Something in my posture worried the guard on duty. But as he started to work the door's lock, I waved to him, ordering him to remain where he couldn't hear our conversation.

"I'm sure Collins already covered this ground," I said. "He was always thorough. I just haven't found it in the files yet."

"What do you want to know?"

"His name was Schwartz?"

"Yes."

"And you met him outside Madrid? In the refugee camp where he worked as a counselor, right?"

"Yes."

"He became your sponsor. He was the one who converted you to Abraham's cause—the violent overthrow of a flawed, weak past—and then he worked hard to have you accepted into his group."

"Collins and I thoroughly covered my history."

"But on the last day, your friend got sick."

"A strain of flu. Yes."

"That we haven't seen in our time." I stood close to Ramiro, letting his face hang over mine. "Your people didn't want to spark an unnecessary pandemic, particularly in a population you wanted to use as an ally."

"Schwartz was disappointed."

"Just disappointed?"

He shrugged. "Devastated is a better—"

"Did you make it happen?"

Ramiro blinked.

I took one step backward while staring at him. "Did you infect him with the flu? Just to free up a slot for you?"

The prisoner stared at me until he decided to stare at one of the bronze walls. "That is an interesting proposal."

"Collins never asked that?"

"No."

"Did you do it?"

"No, Carmen. I didn't do any such thing."

"That's good to hear," I allowed.

He nodded.

"In twelve years, Collins never asked that question?"

He shook his head and smiled, saying, "He didn't."

"But could Abraham have thought that you did such a wicked thing to your friend? Is that possible?"

"I have no idea what the man considered," he said.

"But both of us can imagine the possibility. Am I right? A person might do the treacherous and horrible, just to get his chance to jump back through time."

The disgust looked genuine, but not particularly deep.

"This is what I believe, Ramiro. I believe that there isn't one question, no matter how unlikely or silly or outright insane, that you haven't already anticipated. At one time or another, you have considered every angle."

His next smile was cautious but proud.

"Whatever you are," I said.

"What do you mean by that, Carmen?"

I closed my mouth, my heart slamming hard and steady. "I think you're ready to say anything," I told him. "Anything. If it suited your needs, short-term or long, you would happily admit to inoculating Schwartz. Or you'd agree that yes, Abraham was suspicious of you. Unless you decided to confess that you have been his most trusted agent from the beginning, allowing yourself to be captured, and then happily causing us to step everywhere but where we needed to be."

"That," Ramiro allowed, "is a singularly monstrous image of me."

Then with no further comment, he swung the weights in his hands, continuing with his morning exercise.

## 8

I rode our smallest elevator to the surface, passing through the concrete-block field office and several more layers of security. One of the CIA girls gave me a lift to the nearby airstrip. As she drove, we chatted about safe subjects. The weather, mostly. And then she smiled in a certain way, mentioning Collins. "I haven't seen much of him lately."

I said, "He's brutally busy."

"Oh, sure."

Collins was a cat locked in a box. In her mind, he was nothing but alive. Since there was no good reason for her to know what happened underground, she knew nothing.

"I'll tell him you asked," I lied.

She smiled. "Would you? Thanks."

An old Globemaster was waiting on the runway, bound for undisclosed

places but called out of the sky to snatch me up. Its crew had strict orders not to speak with their important passenger, which meant that I sat alone in the dark along with the rest of the cargo—a pair of battered Humvees and crates of medical supplies bound for some desperate place. My seat had the luxury of a tiny window, but there wasn't much to see, what with the clouds of black smoke from the burning Saudi oil fields. But night found us over Missouri, and we crossed into a wide pocket of relatively clear air. The stars were exactly where they belonged, and I had the best reason to believe that none of them would explode in the near future. A power outage had struck Kentucky. A wilderness lay beneath me, broken only by a few headlights creeping along and the occasional home blessed with generators and extra fuel to burn. Who was the culprit tonight? At least two homegrown insurgencies had been playing hell with the TVA lately. But the power grid was tottering on its best day, what with every reactor mothballed and barely a fart's worth of hydrocarbons finding its way to us.

I didn't belong in this world.

Some years ago, I had carelessly stepped off my earth, entering a realm that only resembled what was home. I was lost, and it was the worst kind of lost. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't decipher which day and which hour had transformed everything familiar and happy.

Was it in '99, when the future decided to invade us?

Or in '02, when Ramiro was found just south of the Canadian border?

Neither moment felt worthy of this kind of dislocation. There were too many ways to redraw the following events, to many reasonable acts that would have minimized the damage wrought by faceless, nameless souls.

Even our early wars seemed incapable of obliterating so much.

But then we hit Pakistan, with India's gracious help, and despite our assurances to obliterate the Muslim A-bombs, the Pakistanis managed to hit their neighbor with half a hundred blasts, pushing our final ally back into a peasant state, desperate and starving.

Three months later, fifty million were dead and the ash of the murdered cities was beginning to cool the world. That's when a half-megaton nuke hidden in a barge was floated in close to the Indian Point reactors north of New York City. A cold front was passing through, and the resulting mushroom cloud threw up an astonishing array of toxins. Everything to the south was doomed. Infrastructure and millions of humans, plus trillions of dollars and the last relics of a working economy—all these good things were lost in a single act of undiluted justice.

Like most people, I watched the horror on television, from the safest room inside my helpless house. After years of government service, I had temporarily left the military. I was burnt-out, I believed. I was actually considering going back to college. To teach or learn; I didn't have any definitive plan yet. I have a fair amount of imagination, but those following days and nights were too enormous to wring so much as a tear from me. I couldn't grasp the damage, the horror. Great cities were rendered unlivable, perhaps for a thousand years. My countrymen, now refugees, were spreading a kind of inchoate, embryonic revolution as they raced inland. And during the worst of it, my government seemed unable to make even

simple decisions about martial law and protecting our other reactors, much less mobilizing our shrinking resources and pitiful manpower.

That was the moment, at least inside my little circle of interrogators and ex-interrogators, that Abraham became a known name: The terrorist's terrorist.

He was a mastermind. He was a disease and a scourge. But even then, the most informed rumors avoided any mention of time travel.

People who knew Ramiro's story naturally assumed that Indian Point was the work of temporal jihadists. My government was temporarily hamstrung by the idea that their enemy had launched their bomb months or years ago, and there was no way to know where the next blast would blossom. It was almost good news when the event-team digested the nuke's isotopic signature and ruled out the bizarre. What we had witnessed was a plain hydrogen warhead—an old Soviet model—that had been smuggled into the country by one of our countless, and to this day still nameless, enemies.

Two years ago, I couldn't cry. But that night, sitting alone in the big overloaded aircraft, I began to sob hard. Sob and moan, but always trying to remind myself that in our quantum universe, every great event was nothing but the culmination of human decision and human indecision, chance and caprice. The poverty and despair surrounding me was vanishingly small. Our earth was just one thin example of what was possible, and because it was possible, this history was inevitable, and why did people waste their time believing that we could ever be special in God's unbounded eye?

After the tears, I got up to pee.

Turbulence struck before I could get back to my seat. I ended up taking refuge inside one of the Humvees, belting in as the entire plane shook and turned wildly. Obviously, the earth's atmosphere was furious at the damage we were doing to it. Even the most rational mind slides easily into a mentality where ancient forces focus their rage on what looked like a fat, helpless, soon-to-be-extinct mechanical bird.

Somewhere in the jumping darkness, an alarm sounded.

Then after a long five minutes, and with no visible change in our circumstances, the blaring stopped.

The only voice I heard emerged from the cockpit. "Who would you fuck first?" he screamed. "Ginger or Mary Ann?"

"Why not Lovey?" an older, wiser voice asked. "She's got the money!"

I laughed somehow, and I held tight to the seat beneath me, and with no warning whatsoever, we dropped hard, plunging through the last of the mayhem. Then the air calmed abruptly and the flaps changed their pitch as the big wings brought us around and down onto a great long slab of brightly lit concrete.

The tires screamed and survived.

Then the lights came up inside, and I finally saw my Humvee wasn't just old, but it had seen a few firefights. Bullet holes and shrapnel gouges begged for repair, but someone must have thought: Why bother? Since we never brought equipment home from the Middle East, I was left wondering if this was LA damage. Or Detroit. Or just the run of the mill unrest that doesn't earn national notice.

As the plane taxied, a crewman came to retrieve me. I rather enjoyed that moment when he stood beside my empty seat, scratching his tired head, wondering whether the only passenger had fallen overboard?

I said, "Hey."

He said, "Ma'am," and then regretted that tiny break of the orders. Without another sound, he showed me to the hatch and opened it moments before a ladder was wheeled into position, and I stepped out into what was a remarkably cool August night, pausing just long enough to thank him.

But he was already wrestling the hatch closed again.

A single limousine waited on the otherwise empty tarmac. I had expected a convoy and probably a quick ride to some bunker or heavily guarded warehouse. But in times like these, important souls preferred to slip about in tiny, anonymous groups. The Globemaster revved its jets and pulled down the runway, fighting for velocity and then altitude. I reached the limousine just as the runway lights were killed. A pair of secret service agents emerged and swept me for weapons. I can't remember the last time I'd held any gun. I bent down and slipped into what proved to be an office on wheels. I would have been more surprised if the president was driving. But only a little more surprised. He offered his hand before he smiled, and his smile vanished before he was done welcoming me.

No pleasantries were offered, or expected.

I sat opposite him and sensibly said nothing.

He needed a shave, and a shower too. Which made me feel a little less filthy after my trip. I kept waiting for the voice that I often heard on the news—the deep voice that reminded us how the struggle wasn't lost and courage was essential. But what I heard instead was a tired bureaucrat too impatient to hold back his most pressing questions.

"What happened to Collins?"

"I don't know," I answered.

"Suicide, or murder?"

I nearly said, "Yes." Since this is a quantum universe, and everything that can happen does happen. Without hesitation or shame.

But instead of humor, I offered, "It was a suicide."

"You're certain?"

"Basically."

He had to ask, "Why?"

"I warned you," I said. "I'm not a criminal investigator. But I think that's the way Collins would have killed himself. At home, quietly, and without too much pain. But if somebody had wanted him dead—"

"What about Jefferson?"

I shrugged. "No, he wouldn't have been that neat or patient. Jefferson, or some associate of his, would have shot Collins and then planted evidence to make it look like a suicide. At least that's my reading of things."

The president wanted to feel sure. That mood showed in his face, his posture. But he couldn't stop thinking about Jefferson. "What about the prison's security?"

"You're asking is there an agent on the premises. One of Abraham's people, maybe?"



His mouth tightened.

"That I can't answer," I cautioned. "Really, I wouldn't even know how to figure it out. If I had the time."

He bristled. He had invested a lot of hope in me, and he expected at least the illusion of results. With a dramatic flourish, he opened a plain folder waiting on his lap. Then with a low grumble, he asked, "What about Collins?"

I wanted past this traitor-in-our-midst talk. But my companion happened to be my government's most important citizen, and he was exactly as paranoid as it took to successfully represent his people.

"Was Collins one of them? I don't think so."

"You know the emergency council's report," he muttered testily.

"Which part? About the future knowing all our secrets? Or the DNA masking Abraham's people?"

"I mean everything." The president took a long moment to frame his next comments. "They didn't show their faces, and for obvious good reasons. Even without Ramiro's testimony, it's hard to deny the possibility—the certainty—that profound genetic manipulation will be possible in a hundred years. Under those masks, the bastards could have looked identical to anybody from our world. At least anybody who happened to leave behind hair or a flake of skin."

The emergency council was a cheerless room filled with scared specialists—off-plumb scientists and old sci-fi writers, plus a couple of psychics who happened to get lucky once or twice about future disasters. They had access to secrets, including scrubbed synopses of Ramiro's insights. And during one pitiless night, they asked each other how could our fight, begun with so many good intentions, have gone so tragically bad.

Their answer was the worst nightmare yet. Among Abraham's soldiers were there perfect duplicates of men and women who would have served in our highest offices, starting in '01? Before our election, they could have slipped into the United States and replaced each of those historic figures. Unknown to us, the worst monsters imaginable would have worn stolen faces and voices. And later, sitting in Washington, those same pretenders could have done untold damage to the innocent, helpless world.

That scenario seemed to explain everything—bad decisions, incompetent methods, and the miserable follow-ups to each tragic misstep.

Paranoia had never enjoyed such an acidic, malicious beauty.

The file was important enough to leave open, and I caught one long glimpse. Which was what the president wanted, I suppose. He was eager to prove to me just how awful everything had become.

On top was a photograph, a famous face gazing up at the camera. The man was elderly now, shaved bald and very weak and far too thin. Each bruise was ugly and yellow, and together they defined the color of his cowering face. Was this where we had come? Taking our own people into a cellar to starve them and beat them, all in the vain hope that they would finally admit that they deserved this horrid treatment?

"Jefferson is Jefferson," I maintained.

The president closed the file.

"And Collins was always Collins."

He sighed. "Are you as sure as you are about the suicide?"

"Even more so," I declared.

"But there was one day last year," the president began. Then he made a rather clumsy show of pushing through more files, lending a banal officiousness to the insulting moment. This was what my leader had been doing while waiting for my plane. Thumbing his way through old security papers that meant nothing.

"I don't care about last year," I said.

"Collins went missing," he snapped. "He was out on leave, and for fourteen hours, the man dropped out of contact with everybody."

"He explained that later," I pointed out. "The man was exhausted. He needed to be alone and regroup. And that's what I believe."

"You do?"

"More and more."

"He wasn't one of Abraham's agents?"

"If he was, then maybe I am. And you are too."

My reply was too awful to consider. I read revulsion in the man's face and his fists. And I kept thinking that if I had bothered to vote in our last election, I never would have helped elect this dangerously incompetent man.

"I am not one of them," he whispered.

"Maybe you are, and you don't know it," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"If our enemies can remake their faces and blend in everywhere, then why not rewire the thought patterns inside other people's heads? If they have that kind of magical technology, then why not inoculate the world with a tailored virus that makes everybody into loyal Muslims who have no choice but to accept the wisdom of this never-seen Abraham?"

Here was one proposition that had never been offered to the president. And he responded exactly as I expected, eyes opening wide, seeing nothing. I laughed it off.

He hoped that I was joking now, but he didn't dare mention my suggestion again. Instead he posed one final question. "And why did Collins kill himself?"

"Remember the dollar?" I asked.

"Excuse me?"

"On the bathroom floor, they found a coin in the blood. Do you remember that detail from the reports?"

He had to admit, "No."

"Collins didn't see or speak to Ramiro for three days. Other than that, nobody remembers him doing anything out of the ordinary. But I have reason to believe that our prisoner gave him something. Something new. Something that was so difficult to accept that it took three days for Collins to wrestle with the concept. And then what the man did . . . I'm guessing this, but I would bet my savings on it . . . Collins went into his bathroom and ran a warm bath and got a knife and then flipped the coin. And the coin happened to come up tails."

"Which means?"

"It's a quantum-inspired game. In this reality, tails meant that he would slit his veins and bleed out."

"And if it was heads?"

"Then Collins would have done something a lot more difficult."

"And what would that have been. . . ?"

"Show the entire world what Ramiro gave him."

"And what was that, do you think?"

"I wish I knew." My laugh was grim and sad, and it suited both of us.

"In my mind, I keep seeing Collins sitting in that bathtub, flipping the coin, working it until he got the answer he wanted."

A phone set between us rang once, very softly, and then stopped.

The president gestured at the invisible sky. "Another plane's heading west. It'll arrive in another hour or two."

His wave was a signal; my door suddenly popped open. It was still summer, but I could feel frost threatening.

"Do I still have full authority?" I asked.

Again, the presidential phone rang, begging for attention. He offered me a nod, saying, "For the time being, yes."

"Full authority?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, sir."

He stared at me for another moment. Then he quietly asked, "What do you think our world's chances are?"

"Very poor," I offered.

"Why?"

I had to say, "With people like us in charge, sir . . . our enemies don't have to do much at all."

## 9

**T**he sound was soft but insistent, coming from the middle of my apartment door. I heard the first rap of the knuckles, but I did nothing for what seemed like a very long time. Aware of the bed beneath me, I looked at my hands in the faint blue glow of the nightlight, and then I turned and gazed at the red face of the clock on the edge of my nightstand. Eight minutes after three in the morning, I read. Twice. Then the knock quickened, and I sat up and put on my only robe and took the time to find my slippers before letting my visitor inside.

"You're not watching," Jefferson began.

I said nothing.

He looked at the darkness and rumpled sheets, his expression puzzled. Then his face fell back into a kind of breathless horror.

"What?" I asked.

He couldn't say it.

What passed for the outside was gloomy, not dark. A single guard stood in the middle of the enormous tunnel, meeting my eyes before she retreated into the shadows.

After my guest stepped inside, I said, "Come in."

Once the door was closed, Jefferson turned on my ceiling light. Then he

showed me a tired, frazzled expression that set the tone. "Now Russia has been hit."

"Hit?"

"Bad."

I said, "Fuck."

"Moscow," he told me.

I sat on the edge of my bed.

"Half a megaton," he muttered, standing in the middle of the small room, hands dangling at his sides.

I stood up again, slippers popping as I walked to my television. The filtering software had a lot of work to do before we could be trusted to see the news. That's why the thirty-minute delay, and that's why the world before me was nearly two thousand seconds in the past.

A handsome Russian was sitting at a news desk, speaking quickly but with a surprising measure of poise. It was easy to believe that Jefferson was wrong. Nothing awful had happened. Not understanding the language or the Cyrillic lettering streaming past, it was easy to embrace the doubts assuring you, "This is nothing. Nothing."

Then the feed switched abruptly, picking up CNN. An older but equally attractive newscaster sat several thousands of miles from the tragedy. But he didn't have any trace of Slavic stoicism. Practically screaming, he declared, "In the morning, without warning, Hell was released just a mile from the Kremlin!"

Jefferson collapsed in my only chair.

I reclaimed my bed, watching the first in a series of inadequate views of an unfolding disaster. The flash was only as bright as the amateur equipment could absorb. The images jumped, and I could hear people screaming in Russian . . . and then the camera and I were being carried into the subway, the screen going black when the power abruptly shut off . . .

The next view was a ten-second snippet from some high-rise far enough away to be spared by the blast.

The third was from someplace very close, and more recent. A digital camera was shoved over a concrete wall, showing a firestorm that was starting to grow wings.

"It's their turn now," I whispered.

Jefferson didn't seem to hear me.

I glanced at my guest and then looked away. "Russia almost seemed to be blessed," I mentioned.

"This is bad, Carmen."

"Yeah."

"No," he said.

I stared at him. "What do you mean?"

The last decade had been relatively sweet for Russia. Pragmatic and naturally authoritarian, it had managed to avoid most of the mayhem. And it didn't hurt that when the Middle East turned to smoke and warlords, the Russians happily sold their oil and natural gas to the EU and a few select friends, increasing their own wealth many times over.

Again, I asked, "What do you mean?"

Jefferson dipped his head.

The television jumped to the BBC. The Prime Minister had a few sturdy words to offer about giving support to all the victims of this latest misery.

I muted the sound.

Which helped Jefferson's focus. With a conspirator's whisper, he told me, "I was just in touch with somebody."

"Who?"

He named the CIA director, using the friends-only nickname.

I said nothing.

Jefferson gave my brown carpet a long, important study.

"What else is wrong?"

The man looked old and extraordinarily tired. What he knew was so urgent that he had to practically run over here to tell me. But now he lacked the courage to put into words what a confidential voice had told him five minutes ago, from the other end of a secure line.

"Has there been another explosion?" I prodded.

"No," he managed. Then he added, "Maybe."

"Shit, Jefferson—"

"Do you know how we were after Indian Point? Down here, I mean. We were terrified that the big assault was finally coming. But then we heard that an old Soviet warhead did the damage. Which meant it wasn't Abraham." He breathed faster, his face red as a blister. "And this bomb wasn't Abraham's either. The yield and isotope readings point to it being one of ours. One of eight."

"Eight? What eight?"

He rubbed his belly.

"Just say it, Jefferson."

"I just learned this for the first time," he reported. "After Indian Point, when everything was crazy . . . Washington dead and millions fleeing . . . somebody with the necessary skills ripped open an Air Force bunker and took out eight high-yield marvels, any one of which matches what we're seeing here . . ."

I said, "Fuck," once again.

He nodded.

"But the failsafes," I said. "Soviet bombs are one thing. But how could somebody make our damned things detonate?"

"Like I said, these people have skills."

The horrific images had returned, and we watched in silence for another minute or two.

"What's Russia doing now?" I asked.

"Their president's in St. Petersburg. And he's talked to our president two, maybe three times."

"The Director told you this?"

"Yes."

"Seven more nukes?"

"What if somebody wants payback for Indian Point?" he asked me.

Or himself.

"But the Russians weren't responsible," I said. "At least not directly, they weren't."

"But what if we're responsible for this?"

"Who's 'we'?"

Wearing an interrogator's face, he stared at me. "I know where you went last week, Carmen. Believe me, I have friends. I have connections. I know whose limousine you sat inside."

I stared back at him.

Then I carefully told him, "No. We had nothing to do with Moscow. Our president's too scared of phantoms to pick a fight with an old enemy."

Jefferson bristled slightly. "What do you mean? 'Phantoms'?"

I didn't answer.

He said, "Carmen," twice, and then gave up.

A truce was declared, ushering in ten minutes of silence. I pushed the television back up to a comfortable volume, and using e-mail and my private sources, I pieced together a chain of events roughly the same as his.

"Their president wants to believe our president," I reported.

Jefferson nodded.

"But if there's a second attack . . ."

He looked at me. For the first time, he had the roving eyes of a healthy male. As if emerging from a fog, Jefferson realized that he was sitting in a woman's apartment and she was wearing nothing but a nightgown and slippers and a fuzzy old robe.

If only to change the desperate mood, he wanted sparks.

I pulled the robe across my chest. Then I told him, "You should go back to your apartment."

He said, "Maybe."

"Now," I said.

He stood stiffly and looked at me. Suddenly I could see Jefferson at his high school dance, standing beside the wrestling mats, too smart to bother asking any girl to accompany him out onto the gymnasium floor.

Against my wishes, I felt sorry for the poor guy.

Then I ushered him to the door and shut and locked it.

Alone, I slowly dressed, and after another hour of television, I stepped out into a tunnel that was beginning to go through the motions of dawn.

In the brightening gloom, I walked.

Then I ran.

I was pounding along my favorite stretch when I passed the round pond with its bluegill and a single dragonfly. Standing on the wooden deck was our resident fisherman. "Hey, Jim."

He almost jumped at the sound of my voice.

"Any bites?"

He said, "Hi, Carmen," and rolled his head. Then he flicked the fly out onto the windless water, and after a pause and a couple of deep swallows, he said, "Somebody just told me something."

"What's that, Jim?"

Looking at his own hands, he explained, "It's this guy I know. He works security upstairs. And I know it's against every order, and we aren't supposed to talk—"

"You heard about Moscow?"

"And St. Petersburg."

I had just enough time to ask, "What about St. Petersburg?"



Then the alarms began to blare—throbbing, insistent noises meant to jangle every nerve—and the fisherman threw down his gear and sprinted toward the nearest elevator. But he was too late. The field station on the ground had declared a lockdown emergency, and according to protocols, every exit disabled itself. Just once, Jim struck the steel door of the elevator with a fist. Then after a moment of quiet muttering, he returned to the pond. His face was as white and dead as the salt surrounding us. Not quite meeting my eyes, he said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. That won't happen again."

And then he picked up his tackle and silently struck out for home.

## 10

For nine days, our prisoner was allowed to keep his normal routine. Guards brought hot meals, clean clothes, and the expected little luxuries. His plumbing and lights worked without interruption, and at appropriate intervals, we spared enough power to brighten his exercise yard. The only significant change was that I stopped meeting with Ramiro. But he didn't mention my absence, not once, just as he refused to discuss what must have been obvious. The shrill alarms would have been audible from inside his cell, and less than an hour later, the first in a sequence of deep, painful rumbles passed through the surrounding salt bed.

Fuel was limited, which was why the tunnel lights were kept at a mid-night glow. And that's why the vegetation began to wither and drop leaves, including inside Ramiro's yard. The dying umbrella trees garnered a few extra glances, I noted. Then after six days, Ramiro's milk turned to the dried variety, and there was a sudden influx of fried bluegill in his dinner, and the banana slices on his morning yogurt were brown at the edges. But his guards provided the largest clues. Even a sloppy observer would have noticed the miserable faces. Not even the hardest professional could hide that level of raw sadness. Ramiro would have kept track of which guards skipped their watch and who was pulled early when they felt themselves about to start blubbering. But again, he didn't say one word that was at all removed from the ordinary.

Jefferson was a minor revelation. That sturdy old bureaucrat threw himself into the disaster, holding meetings and ordering studies. Key machinery had to be identified, inventories made of every spare part. Our generators were industrial fuel cells, and it was a minor victory when two extra barrels of methanol were discovered behind a pile of construction trash. For two days, the practicality of hydroponics was explored. But a determined search found no viable seed, save for some millet and cracked corn meant for his assistant's pet parakeet. Our home was a prison, not a long-term refuge. But at least there were ample stocks of canned goods and MREs, and the water and air were agreeable to purification. Plus, there were quite a few handymen in our ranks. Most estimates gave us at least six months and perhaps as many as eight months of comfortable security. That was a point worth repeating each day, at the beginning of our mandatory meetings.

With nobody watching us, Jefferson was free to transform himself. He

announced that there were few secrets worth keeping anymore. Only Ramiro remained off-limits. Then he told the grim, brief history of our latest war. All of us were invited to his apartment to watch the recordings that he'd made of news broadcasts and secret communications, and then the final pitiful message from the field station. Few accepted his invitation, but that didn't matter. Word got out quickly enough. Everybody knew what had just transpired, and the long-term prospects, and in a fashion, just how extraordinarily lucky we had been.

Through it all, Jefferson dispensed clear, critical directions as well as praise and encouragement, plus the occasional graveyard joke.

I preferred to keep to myself, investing my waking hours in the endless study of Ramiro.

Sometimes when he was alone, the man would suddenly grin. I had never seen that expression on him before. It wasn't a joyful look, or wistful. What I saw was an empty expression—a broad sycophantic look that I have seen in other faces, on occasion, particularly when people are struggling to believe whatever thought is lurking behind their bright, blind eyes.

Ramiro would fall asleep at his usual time, but then he'd wake up again, usually around three in the morning, and lie very still, staring up into the darkness for an hour and sometimes much longer.

Instead of new books and movies, he requested titles that he already knew—as if granting his mind an easier, more familiar path to walk.

On the ninth day, I had a tall cold glass of lemonade brought with his lunch, and he drank it without complaint.

On the tenth morning, Jim opened the cell door and said, "Sir," before ushering the prisoner down the short hall to the exercise yard. After the usual bookkeeping, he took his post inside, standing before the only door. Some of Ramiro's guards had shown worrisome symptoms. But after his initial panic, Jim had turned outwardly calm, sturdy. Maybe if I had paid closer attention, I would have seen some clue. But then again, even the best interrogator must accept the idea that she knows more about the beginnings of the universe than she will ever learn about the shape of a person's true mind.

But Ramiro noticed something.

I don't know what it was or why then, but after a few trips back and forth in the yard, the prisoner paused, passing one of the rubberized weights to his other hand and then bending down, picking up the thick dried and very dead leaf from the floor beneath the starved tree.

For a long moment, he stared at Jim, saying nothing.

They were ten feet apart, and the guard was watching everything.

Normal procedures demanded a second guard be on duty outside. She was watching on monitors and through the two-way glass, and sensing trouble, she set off a silent alarm. I arrived half a minute after a backup team of armed warriors, and two steps ahead of Jefferson.

In that span, nothing had changed.

Maybe Ramiro was waiting for an audience. But I think not. My guess is that he still wasn't sure what he would say or the best way to say it, and like any artist, he was simply allowing time to pass while his invisible brain struggled to find the best solution.

Through the monitors, I watched the brown leaf slip free of his hand.

"So, Jim," said Ramiro. At last.

Jim didn't move, and he didn't make any sound. And if his face changed, the expression didn't register on the security cameras.

As if getting ready to unwrap a wonderful gift, Ramiro smiled. It was an abrupt, startling expression followed by the joyous, almost effervescent words, "So how's your home town these days? How is Salt Lake City doing?"

Jim sagged against the door.

From outside, Jefferson ordered, "Get in there!"

"No," I ordered.

The backup team ignored me.

"No!" I stepped in front of them and looked at Jefferson. "You tell them. Who's in charge here?"

With a tight sigh, Jefferson said, "Wait then. Wait."

Jim was crying now. In a matter of moments, a weepy little boy had emerged and taken charge.

I told the guards to back away from the door.

Jim muttered a few words, too soft for anybody to understand.

"What's that, Jim?" asked Ramiro.

Nothing.

"I can only guess," the prisoner offered with a warm, infectious tone. "Another nuclear weapon must have struck another reactor. But this one was closer to us, wasn't it? And the wind must have blown those poisons over the top of us."

That was a dreamy, hopeful explanation, considering the circumstances.

"So we're temporarily cut off down here. Isn't that about it, Jim? And we'll have to wait what? A few weeks or months to be rescued?"

"No," said Jim.

Finding success, Ramiro smiled.

"Am I wrong, Jim?"

The response was abrupt, and vivid. With a string of awful sentences, Jim defined the scale of the new war and its brutal, amoral consequences.

"Everything above us is dead," he declared.

Ramiro's smile wavered, but he wouldn't let go of it.

"About a thousand nukes went off, and wildfires are still burning, and the entire continent is poisonous dead. The field office is abandoned. We aren't getting any messages from anybody. Not a squeak. We've got some security cameras working, our only connections to the surface, and they're only working on battery power. It's the middle of August, but there isn't any sun, and judging by what we can see and what we can guess, it isn't even reaching forty below at noon. . . !"

Maybe Ramiro had genuine hopes for his dirty nuke story—an awful but manageable nightmare. But this nightmare was more plausible, and he must have known that for several days. Yet he refused to react. He did nothing for one, two, three breaths. Enormous events had pushed him farther than even he could handle, and discovering what might be a weakness on his part, the prisoner suddenly looked lost, perhaps even

confused, unable to conjure up one thin question, comment, or even a word.

And then Jim pulled his weapon.

The pistol would work only in his hand, and its ammunition was small and lightweight, designed to bruise and break bones but never kill. That's why I told everyone, "No. Leave them alone!"

My instincts were looking for a revelation.

But other people's instincts overrode my order. The guards pushed me away and started working at the door's stubborn locks. For a few seconds, nothing happened. Neither man spoke or moved. But then Jim set the gun's barrel against his target's eye, and I heard a quiet thump, and the bullet shattered the back of the socket before burrowing its way into the miserable, dying brain.

Ramiro dropped the weights, one striking his right foot. But he didn't appear to notice. Unblinking eyes stared at the corpse twitching on the floor in front of him. The prisoner was impressed. Enthralled, even. Perhaps he had never seen a man die. Cities and nations had been destroyed, but carnage had remained cool and abstract. Until that moment, he never appreciated just how messy and simple death was, or that he would have to take a deep breath before regaining his bearings, looking up slowly before noticing me standing in the open door.

"So this is what you wanted," I said. "The death of humanity, the end of the world . . ."

"No," he whispered.

"Are you sure?"

He sluggishly shook his head.

"Or Abraham wanted this," I suggested. "A nuclear winter, the extinction of our species."

No reply was offered.

I stepped over Jim and then stared up into Ramiro's face, allowing him no choice but to meet my eyes. Quietly, I said, "There is no such creature as Abraham, is there?"

He didn't react.

"And no army of temporal jihadists either."

His eyes closed.

"Just you," I persisted. "You're the only time traveler. Fifteen years ago, you arrived alone in the backcountry of Kashmir. You brought no more than what you could carry on your back, including the uranium and a few odd gizmos from your world. Then you littered the Middle East with just enough physical evidence to give your story legs. Like that bomb in Islamabad, right? You set that up before you came to America. And then you let yourself get caught in Montana, which was your plan from the beginning."

His shoulders lifted, a shrug beginning.

I grabbed his chin and shook him. "Why send an entire army? Why bother? When a single soldier armed with the right words can do just as well . . . that's what this is about . . ."

Ramiro opened his eyes.

An impressed little smile began to break loose. He asked softly, "And when did you realize this, Carmen?"

"Always," I admitted. "But I couldn't believe it. I wouldn't let myself even admit that it was possible. Not until I saw a photograph of a former official with my own government, bloodied and terrified, and I realized that our own hands had done that to him." I shook his chin again. "That's when I saw what made sense. Finally. Maybe there was an Abraham, but if you happened to be him . . ."

Ramiro laughed, and with a cat's grace grabbed my wrist and yanked, stepping out of my grip.

"Who's the prisoner here?" I muttered.

The laugh brightened.

"And who is the torturer?"

He offered a slight and very quick bow.

"But why?" I wanted to know.

"Carmen," he began. "Believe me, I could offer a thousand plausible stories. But how would you know if I was being truthful, in whole or even in part?"

"Try it anyway," I said.

But he backed away, waving both hands as if to fend off those temptations. "The point is, Carmen . . . your world was deserving. Almost every outrage that has happened to you has been justified. A necessary, reasonable revenge has been taken. And these many years . . . almost every day that I have spent in your world, Carmen . . . has brought me untold pleasure . . ."

## 11

Last year, during an official leave from the prison, Collins managed to slip away from his official escorts. His shadows. I can only speculate what he did during most of the day, but fourteen hours is a very long time, if you have a good plan and the discipline to make it happen. My personal knowledge extends to two hours spent together during the afternoon, inside a second-story room at a Red Roof Inn just outside Denver. Despite Ramiro's insistence to the contrary, I'm not unlovely and I have my charms, and his interrogator and I had been carrying on an infrequent but cherished affair—five surreptitious encounters over the course of an ugly decade, moments where sex and sexual talk could dominate over the secrets of state.

I never discussed my work with him, and he almost never mentioned his.

But Denver was different. I stepped into a darkened room to find a changed man. Collins was pale and much heavier than usual and obviously exhausted. After an hour of sweat and modest success, we gave up. I talked about showering, and he talked about slipping away in another minute or two. Then for a long while, we just sat side by side in bed, and in that way people in our world would do, we began to list the friends and associates that had died because of Indian Point.

Until that moment, I didn't realize that Collins had been a father. Not that he was close to his fifteen-year-old son, but the unfortunate boy had lived on Long Island with his mother. The fallout plume blocked every bridge to safety, and like a million others, they spent the next several

days chasing a string of promised rescue ships and rumors of airlifts. Collins' best guess, based on a couple of sat-phone calls received near the end, was that they had managed to survive for a week or eight days, and then both died, probably during the Isip riots.

"Sorry" is a weak word. But I offered it anyway.

This man that I didn't truly know silently accepted my sorrow. Then he tried to shrug, and with a bleak resignation that I couldn't understand at the time, he mentioned, "This could have turned out differently."

When haven't those words been valid?

With his deep, godly voice, Collins said my name. Then he smiled—a crooked, captivating smile on his worst day—and quietly asked, "Why are we doing what we do? Anymore, what are we after?"

"It's our job," I offered.

He saw through those words. "Bullshit, darling. Bullshit."

"Yeah, but we're still the good guys," I said.

Then we both enjoyed a sorry little laugh.

"I'll tell you what I'm doing," he said, shaking his head. "Every day, I'm trying to save the world."

"Oh, is that all?"

He kept smiling, though he didn't laugh. He let me stare into his eyes, taking my measure of his soul. Then carefully, slowly, he said, "You once told me about this woman. Do you remember? You met her on some cross-country flight. You got her to talking, and she eventually confessed her plan to kill her elderly husband. Do you remember that anecdote?"

"Sure."

"Did you ever follow up on it?"

"What do you mean?"

He didn't have to explain himself.

With a defensive growl, I admitted, "No, I haven't bothered."

"Why not?"

I could have mentioned that it wasn't my particular business, or that I never knew anything of substance, or that no crime had been committed. But I didn't offer excuses. Instead, I admitted, "The woman loved her husband. Agree with her or not, I don't believe she would have harmed the man to be cruel or out of convenience."

"And you're sure that she loved him?"

"I could tell," I said.

"And I believe you, Carmen."

I sat quietly, wondering what was this about.

"You know, you're very good. Piecing together clues, I mean. Reading the subject's emotions, their intentions." Then he laughed, insisting, "Maybe you're not quite my equal. But there's nobody better than us."

Just then, I could not read that man. I had absolutely no clue what Collins was thinking.

"Saving the world," he repeated.

I waited.

"I'm working on something huge," he admitted. Then with a wise little sneer, he edited his comment. "I'm working on somebody huge. A subject unlike anyone you've ever met or even imagined."



I didn't want this conversation. He was breaking our most essential rule, bringing work into our bed.

"That man is still holding some big secrets," Collins confided. "All these years working on nobody but him, and I still haven't gotten to his core."

I climbed out from under the sheets.

"If I could just get what I wanted from the guy," he muttered.

I said, "Stop that."

With sharp disappointment, Collins stared at me. It took several moments for him to decide what to say next. Then he offered what had to be the most cryptic and peculiar excuse that I had ever heard.

"If he gives me what I want," he began.

A genuine smile broke across his weary white face.

"If he shares what he knows, Carmen, I can save the world. Not once, but a thousand times. A million times. More times than we could count . . . and now wouldn't that be a legacy worth any cost?"

## 12

**W**e decided to throw the prisoner into Jefferson's apartment, accompanied by half a dozen pissed-off guards, and the guards were instructed to sit Ramiro down before the television, and in sequence, play the Apocalypse recordings for him.

Jim's body was carried away, and Jefferson found himself standing alone with me. He asked the walls, "So what do we do with him next?"

"What do you want to do?"

My colleague refused to look at my eyes. "Our food is limited," he pointed out. "Ramiro constitutes more than 1 percent of our population. At this point, can we really afford to keep him alive?"

Then he braced himself.

But I surprised him, saying, "Agreed," as if I had come to the same inescapable conclusion.

But our methods seemed important, and that's what we were discussing when one of the guards returned.

"Lemonade-7 wants paper and a pen," she reported.

"Give him whatever he wants," I said.

She glanced at Jefferson.

He nodded.

"And tell him he doesn't have much time," I yelled as she ran off.

For a few moments, Jefferson studied me. But he didn't have the stomach to ask what he wanted. Instead, he quietly admitted, "Maybe you're right, Carmen. A bullet is simple. But shoving him out on the surface, letting him fend for himself . . . that makes more sense . . ."

Yet that left various logistics to consider. One of the elevators had to be unlocked, power had to be routed back into it, and every passenger except Ramiro had to be protected from the radiation and cold. Those necessities took dozens of people nearly two hours of determined labor, and then somebody mentioned that a short-wave antenna and Geiger counter

could be set up on the dead prairie and spliced into the elevator's wiring—helpful inspirations, but cause for another hour delay.

According to the guards, Ramiro remained cooperative and busy. Unblinking eyes paid close attention to the news broadcasts, particularly during those desperate minutes when city after city suddenly quit transmitting. Each of his guards seemed to nourish a different impression of his mood. The prisoner was relishing the slaughter, or he was numbed by what he was seeing, or maybe he was only pretending to watch events play out on that tiny screen. But every witness agreed: the prisoner's first focus was in filling the yellow pages of the legal pad, his head dropping for long intervals, that delicate artisan's hand scribbling dense equations and weaving diagrams and sometimes adding a paragraph or two in his unborn hodgepodge of a language.

It was early afternoon when he set down the pen. A few minutes later, without explanation, he was brought to the elevator. He was still wearing dress trousers and a short-sleeved shirt, plus his favorite sandals. But the two volunteers waiting for him were half-hidden inside layers of cumbersome gear.

Ramiro handed the filled pad to the shorter figure.

I didn't look at his gift. I knew what was on it. With both hands, I folded it in half and handed it to the nearest guard. "It's a little goddamn late now, isn't it?" I snapped at him.

"Maybe enough people will survive," he offered.

I tried to cut him open with my gaze. Then I turned and shuffled through the open steel door, my oversized fireman's boots clumping with each step.

Jefferson checked his sidearm, picked up the makeshift antenna and Geiger counter, and followed me.

There was just enough room for our equipment and three bodies. Jefferson pulled his oxygen mask aside and gave a few final orders. Then the door shut, and with a sudden crotchety jolt, the elevator started to climb, shaking slightly as it gained momentum.

"Do you understand what I just gave you?" Ramiro asked.

"Of course I understand," I said.

"Tell me, why don't you?" Jefferson asked.

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Ramiro smiled, but he sounded uncharacteristically tense. "Time travel is not particularly difficult."

Neither of us reacted.

He said, "Lorton Energy is cheap, if you know the right tricks."

I looked only at Jefferson. "The first time Ramiro wrote about Lorton and Casimir plates, he didn't give us those tricks. He pretty effectively misled our scientists into chasing the wrong methods. But of course a man who remembers the dates and positions of dozens of supernovae—a creature with that kind of faultless memory—would easily digest the plans for a working time machine. That's what Collins realized. Eventually. He didn't mention it to anybody, but for these last years, Collins was chasing the tools that would allow us to go back in the past, like Ramiro did, but this time make things right."

Jefferson shook his head. "Yeah, but each incursion in the past is a separate event," he recalled. "If he jumped back, he would accomplish what? Setting up a new time line?"

"Except we could send back a million teams," I replied. "A million attempts to make amends, and each new history owing its existence to us."

No one spoke for a moment. The only sound was the air rushing around the racing elevator.

Then Jefferson turned to Ramiro. "You gave Collins the time machine. But then for some reason he killed himself."

"Ramiro gave him more than the time machine," I explained. "He also told him the rest of the story. How he had come alone, and there was no Abraham, and every tragedy that had happened to the world was directly tied to what Ramiro had said to Collins, and what Collins had unwittingly fed upstream to the gullible and weak."

Jefferson put a hand on his pistol.

I watched Ramiro's face. If it weren't for the tightness around the mouth and the glassiness to the eyes, I would have imagined that he was relaxed. Happy, even. Maybe he was assuring himself that these years and his sacrifices had been a great success. Not perfect, no. But who could have guessed that Moscow would have been nuked? Which meant that in countless realities—realms not too different from ours—he had achieved exactly what it was that he'd set out to achieve here.

"And Collins didn't expect that part?" Jefferson asked.

"That's my guess," I admitted.

His hand dropped back to his side.

A few moments later, the elevator began to slow.

My ears were popping. I felt my heart quicken, and I judged that Ramiro was breathing faster too. A sudden chill was leaking into the elevator, and I mentioned it, and then I suggested, "We should put on our masks."

Jefferson looked tired and angry. He wiped his eyes twice before making himself strap the oxygen mask over his weepy face.

I left mine off for the moment.

"I don't think you wanted this world to die," I said.

Ramiro didn't respond.

"You were hoping to hurt a lot of people and leave the rest of us wiser,"

I continued. "At least that's what you told yourself. Except what really inspired you was wielding this kind of power, and you won a lot of fun for your troubles, and now it's finally over. You're done. We're going to throw you into the cold, into the wasted darkness, and you'll have to stumble around until you die some miserable way or another."

Ramiro made a soft, odd sound. Like when a bird cheeps in its sleep.

The elevator had nearly stopped. I stood facing the prisoner, my back flush against the door.

He smiled with a weak, vacuous charm.

In the end, the prisoner was defiant but terrified, utterly trapped but unable to admit his sorry circumstances. He believed that he was still in charge of his fate. Arrogance saved for this moment made him smile. Then he said, "You know quite a bit, Carmen. I've been impressed. But you should realize that I won't allow any ignoble, indecent finish for me."

The elevator door began to pull open.

Ramiro's eyes never closed, even once he was dead.

Behind me, a young woman's voice—a voice I knew from my ride to the nearby airstrip—called out, "Hello? Yes? Can we help?"

The day was bright and warm.

Two men suddenly dropped to their knees. But Jefferson stood again, stripping off the mask and then his heavy outer coat, staggering into the functioning, fully staffed office, finally stopping before a window that looked out over a flat, glorious landscape and a sky of endless blue.

"Everything was faked?" he whispered.

"Everything," I said.

"The newscasts, the communications?"

"Digital magic," I mentioned. "And playacting by real people, yes."

"The security cameras."

"Easy enough."

"But I felt the cold," he said.

I started to explain how when the elevator started to rise, a dozen portable air conditioning units began cooling down the top of the shaft.

"But we felt the explosions, Carmen!"

"Those were the easiest tricks," I admitted. "A few tactical nukes thrown down some nearby oil wells."

He pressed his face against the warm glass, not fighting the tears anymore. Maybe he was crying out of relief. But in my case, I was crying for Jim, and for Collins, and for countless dead souls that I couldn't put names to. Behind us, a medical team was working hard to revive a man who refused to return to the living. When they finally gave up, we went to look at Ramiro's limp body.

"Do you think he saw?" Jefferson asked.

I knelt and closed the eyes.

"In the end," he persisted, "do you think he realized just how badly you tricked him?"

"Yes," I said.

I said, "No."

Then I stood and walked away, adding, "It happened both ways, and more times than I would care to count." ○

## POST-GENRE SPECULATIVE FICTION

**THE CASTLE IN THE FOREST**

by Norman Mailer  
Random House, \$27.95  
ISBN: 0394536495

**SFWA EUROPEAN HALL OF FAME**

edited by James Morrow  
and Kathryn Morrow  
Tor, \$26.95  
ISBN: 076531536X

**WATERMIND**

by M.M. Buckner  
Tor

**GREY**

by Jon Armstrong  
Night Shade Books, \$14.95  
ISBN: 1597800651

**HARM**

by Brian W. Aldiss  
Del Rey, \$21.95  
ISBN: 034549671X

**ICE**

by Vladimir Sorokin  
New York Review Books, \$23.95  
ISBN: 1590171950

It seems paradoxical that while genre SF in general and its subset of science fiction in particular and even long established writers thereof are struggling for bare commercial survival, with SF publishers desperately resorting to retro nostalgia-evoking packaging to retain a dwindling aging readership, in the wider literary realm, speculative fic-

tion is becoming more and more à la mode.

But many paradoxes are koans containing satoris that can be win-kled out if one digs deep enough. Here is a blurb from the front cover of *Grey* by Jon Armstrong:

"... It's a mad, stylish, trippy, endlessly inventive romp through the biohazardous wastes of post-genre literature."

On the surface, this is one more piece of blurbish hyperbole. But digging deeper, one finds much of significance in this single sentence of the usual book cover puffery.

For one thing, the blurber is Michael Chabon. Chabon is one of a pride of literary lions and lionesses who have taken to the writing of science fiction or something superficially like it over the past few years—and in some cases longer—that includes the likes of Margaret Atwood, John Updike, Philip Roth, and the Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing.

Some of these literary luminaries, like Atwood, shrilly proclaim that they're "not writing science fiction," when of course they are, like the friend of a relative of mine who wanted me to help sell his novel about giant trees on Mars, which he also proclaimed "is not science fiction." Others, like Roth and Updike, wisely ignore the whole question entirely, while Lessing, upon winning the Nobel, forthrightly acknowledged her science fiction as a part of her total oeuvre of which she was proud.

But here Chabon, who makes no public bones about having written

the stuff, is blurbing a novel published by Night Shade Books, a small genre press.

And he is saying something of deep significance whether he knows it or not—and I suspect he really doesn't. Not so much about Armstrong's novel, but about a certain literary attitude, the key phrase being "... the biohazardous wastes of post-genre literature."

What does this really mean?

*Grey* certainly is a "mad, stylish, trippy, endlessly inventive romp" through the hazardous psychic and cultural wastes of a supercorporate supermediated super brand-place-ment super showbizzy supertrendy future where all that counts, and I do mean *all*, is the styles and brands of the clothing you wear and the food that you eat and the magazines you subscribe to and the shows you watch and the bands you worship and every little bit of your life down to toilet paper and snot-rags.

Nothing here is "biohazardous," but everything is psychologically hazardous. One little wrong move can condemn you to a fate worse than death—you could suddenly find yourself less than *au courant*, oh my god, no longer *chic*!

*Grey* is wickedly funny, camp on methedrene, beyond even satire, but nothing to be taken seriously. The "hero," or narrator anyway, Michael Rivers, is such a fashionista that he's had his vision tweaked so that he sees everything in grey because that's the trend he's following. He is instantly smitten by an inamorata following the same fashion constellation for no other reason. And that's about the sanest thing in Armstrong's first novel. It's hilarious, it's nasty, it's all surface and no depth, it's full of future artifacts, gizmos, technology, clothing, that doesn't re-

ally violate any of the laws of mass and energy per se, but doesn't care about them either, that builds the novel's comic inferno verisimilitude entirely on futuristic brand name recognition.

Is this science fiction? Is this speculative fiction? Is this "SF"?

What Chabon seems to be saying is that this sort of thing is a "romp through . . . the wastes of post-genre fiction." And that therefore Jon Armstrong is a "post-genre" novelist mining the wastes of genre literature, in this case "genre science fiction," for material to be recycled for his own higher literary purposes.

Whether this is what Jon Armstrong is really doing, or what he thinks he's doing, or what Chabon himself is doing, or even what Chabon may think he's doing, is beside the point here. The point is that this literary attitude is what "post-genre" fiction is really all about.

Notice that this stuff is being called *post-genre* fiction, not *non-genre* fiction. *Non-genre* fiction would be a critically useless distinction, since it would encompass every bit of fiction written before nineteenth century printing technology created the very possibility of mass produced affordable books and magazines for mass as opposed to elite tastes, at least as conceived of by those very self-appointed elites, thereby creating "genre" itself.

This was one of the great inflection points in literary history, and the emergence of "post-genre fiction" may turn out to be another.

What is "genre?" The ultimate literary authority in English, the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defines it as "A particular style or category of works of art; esp. a type of literary work characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose."



Well, one might argue that "genre fiction" need not be written in any particular style or for any particular purpose other than to make money by selling it to a targeted readership, but any given genre of genre fiction must certainly be defined by "form" in the extended sense. Extended to include not only the basic plot structure of a hero facing a problem or villain, struggling against same and reaching a dramatic crescendo, and terminating with some sort of resolution, but also the setting in which the story takes place. Westerns in the Old West, nurse novels in hospitals or doctors' offices, high fantasy when knighthood was in flower, and so forth.

Therefore, to extend the OED definition to its converse, "non-genre fiction" would be any fiction that *cannot* be characterized by a particular form, style, or purpose. But the OED defines science fiction as "Imaginative fiction based on postulated scientific discoveries or spectacular environmental changes, freq. set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel."

As we all know, science fiction can also be set in the present, or the past, or the alternate present, or the alternate past, and certainly does not have to involve space or time travel. But even under the OED's excessively restricted definition, taken together with its definition of "genre fiction," the *Oxford English Dictionary* in effect declares that science fiction is *not* inherently genre fiction by literary definition.

We all probably know this, too, but we also know that while science fiction itself did not begin with the publication of the first issue of *Amazing Stories* in 1926, *genre* science fiction more or less did. Science fiction written to pulp action-adventure plot-

lines with a restricted set of character types, with time-honored and weathered tropes, evolving into a less and less restricted literature closer to the extended OED definition through the Campbellian Golden Age, the post-World War II Renaissance, the New Wave, and so forth, to where it is today.

Which is a long upward literary evolution from where it started, but leaving it still trapped in the commercial, demographic, marketing, and packaging parameters of genre publishing. At least, that is, for those writers who for whatever reasons have had their fiction published by that expiring apparatus long enough to have become identified with it no matter what they've been writing in the more mature stages of their careers, including yours truly.

And that is the "wastes of post-genre literature" in general (and not) the wasteland of genre science fiction that Chabon's blurb is a comradely attempt to keep a talented first novelist like Jon Armstrong from being stranded in by declaring that he is only a day-tripper "romping" and rummaging through the cultural detritus.

Detritus?

Not at all. In fact, Chabon, Lessing, and even the likes of Atwood know that even when they don't know that they know it. Far from being a cultural rubbish heap, the material of speculative fiction is the current cultural mother lode and will be for the foreseeable future. Inherently. Inescapably.

In the twenty-first century, what else is there to write culturally meaningful fiction about? Global warming. An exponentially exfoliating cybersphere. Designer genes. World-wide Jihad. Artificial Intelligence. Artificial Stupidity. Human cloning. Post-

humanity. The possible death of the biosphere. That is the present that is making the future, and the impending future than has already transformed the cultural landscape. Literature that ignores it all can only be written by and for human ostriches gazing into their navels with their heads so thoroughly buried in the sands of the present that they don't realize that it has long since become the past.

Genre science fiction is dying.

Long live post-genre speculative fiction.

The operative questions being who is going to write it, how and where is it going to be published, to what extent those writing it will be hamstrung by lack of access to nearly a century's worth of knowledge, craft, and experience into endless reinvention of the literary wheel, and therefore how successful post-genre speculative fiction is going to be on a literary level. Or to put it another way, how long it will take the new breed of authors to reach the level of Philip K. Dick, Theodore Sturgeon, Alfred Bester, or Brian W. Aldiss? Or for that matter, even a first novelist like M.M. Buckner.

Buckner's first novel, *Watermind*, though published by Tor, a long-standing last bastion of genre science of fiction of literary quality (and that is by no means a contradiction in terms) is, I would contend, the sort of post-genre genre speculative fiction (and that is not necessarily a contradiction in terms either) we are seeing more and more of in these latter days.

There is a superficially hard SF premise, namely that the profligate dumping of all manner of electronic garbage into the Mississippi River system—cell phones, batteries, motherboards, television sets, mi-

crochips, solar cells, whatever—has combined with the superabundance of complex chemical sludge and microorganisms therein to create a kind of electro-organic hybrid organism, the Watermind of the title, a bioelectronic neural network evolving into a kind of sentience.

The Watermind, which has come into being in a backwater "Devil's Swamp" near Baton Rouge, grows, evolves, oozes and then speeds into the Mississippi toward New Orleans and the open sea beyond, perhaps ultimately threatening technological civilization itself. The story is that of a cast of characters trying to prevent it.

You can already see the movie of which *Watermind* could be the novelization, as one more giant amorphous monster from the Swamp threatens the end of Life As We Know It and our doughty crew of heroes seeks to save civilization from mucoid doom.

That would be the straight genre version. But that's not what Buckner has written. It may seem that the McGuffin of the novel, the combining of e-trash and chemical pollution to create the Watermind, is very rubbery science indeed, best taken as a grand cautionary metaphor, and therefore turning the novel into fantasy. But that's not the way it feels, because Buckner has taken enormous care and apparently done exhaustive research to make this politically correct green conceit scientifically believable on a literary level.

And that is the very essence of not merely science fiction, but *hard* science fiction. And the physical action of the story—as a brilliant young female scientist, her musician and worker lover, a ruthless corporate CEO, and a cast of other technically proficient characters chase, track,

attempt to destroy, communicate with, and even save the Watermind—is more of the same. It's an exciting novel of technological and scientific detection and combat, in the course of which Buckner masterfully brings to life the diked, leveed, dammed machinery with which technological civilization has tamed the Mississippi, or at least tried to.

But *Watermind* is also a sort of sub-species of the Southern Regional novel, a novel of *place*, in which the region of Louisiana through which the Mississippi wanders from Baton Rouge to New Orleans is a major character too—the landscape, the flora and fauna, the local denizens, the music, the food, the patois.

And this being Louisiana, it is also a novel steeped in the mystical and religious ambiance thereof, a rich gumbo of Christian fundamentalism, gris-gris, voodoo, laced with a corruption that itself borders on the cultural. Then too zydeco, the music thereof, plays a key part of the plot itself on a technological level that is rendered in considerable musicological depth.

Yet beyond and within all of that, *Watermind* is almost dominantly a novel of character—that of the psychological, emotional, and sexual relationships of the young female scientist, her “lower-class” musically adept lover, her dead father, the Argentinean CEO of the corporate entity pursuing the Watermind, indeed the alien Watermind itself.

So what we have here is indeed a post-genre novel, a novel that works the interfaces between any number of genres, where the best modern fiction is now evolving. But *Watermind* is most definitely *not* “a romp through the biohazardous wastes of post-genre literature” by a day-tripper rummaging through the detritus

thereof for material to recycle for “higher literary purposes.” Buckner is obviously a writer well-schooled enough in and respectful of this cultural and literary motherload of material, tropes, and techniques to move freely within it in a knowledgeable, serious manner rather than ignorantly exploiting it like a snobbish literary tourist.

Nevertheless, this “post-genre” work of speculative fiction is being published by a genre publisher—by arguably the most literarily sincere and idealistic of “SF” publishers—which is all too likely to leave it floundering in the sucking mud of the commercial swamp that genre publishing has become in the twenty-first century, despite the best efforts of Tor.

This is the dilemma of the serious writer of speculative fiction at the turn of the twenty-first century. If you truly understand the material and have learned the techniques evolved to deal with it by your literary ancestors over a century, you almost have to have had a track record as a “sci-fi” writer, and your work is going to be marketed to a dwindling readership that is not really the one you’re after in the first place these days. And if you’re just starting out, you’re likely to have your work channeled into that machinery from the outset unless you get lucky or happen to have unusually precocious publishing street smarts.

If you’re trying to exploit the central literary material of the twenty-first century from outside the genre ghetto without knowledge of and respect for what’s been accomplished with it in the past and how it was done, the chances are you really won’t be able to do it literary justice yourself, because the attitude of the dominant literary culture toward

"genre" is going to discourage you from even trying to learn how. Or even why.

That's where speculative fiction has arrived at in the twenty-first century.

In the United States, that is.

But while English-language speculative fiction was literarily and commercially dominant throughout the world in the twentieth century, it was *Anglophone* speculative fiction that dominated, not simply *American* speculative fiction. And while they seemed to be more or less the same thing for a good part of the last century, as the best British writers thereof chased after the greater economic gains of the US market, they really weren't, not quite, and they are certainly not so today.

Consider the long career and present plight of Brian W. Aldiss.

Aldiss has been publishing forthright science fiction novels for a full half century now on both sides of the Atlantic and short science fiction longer than that, and has never hidden it behind prevarications like "speculative fiction" or "imaginative literature." He's a regular convention-goer on both sides of the Atlantic, he's won Hugos and Nebulas, he's a Grand Master of the SFWA, he's written extensive criticism of the genre including a book-length literary history, publicly championed the genre in national newspapers and major literary journals, and was one of the major figures of the genre in the twentieth century in the United States as well as Britain.

But Aldiss is also a significant British "man of letters," publishing so-called "mainstream" novels, autobiography, plays, and much else having little or nothing to do with speculative fiction. Nor, in Britain at least, have these two aspects of his

career really been regarded as separate incarnations. In British letters, there is a relatively thin but long history of writers who have managed this—H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, J.G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, Ian Banks—an historically supportive tradition, beginning with two novelists whose earlier science fiction was published before science fiction publication became genrefied.

But while the likes of Thomas Pynchon and Gore Vidal have written fully rounded and literarily successful science fiction novels, they had solid reputations as "mainstream literary novelists" before they did, and so were never typed as "sci-fi guys." I am so hard-pressed to come up with American writers with prior reputations as "science fiction writers" who have enjoyed similar careers in their own country and who have later been accepted as "serious" writers—Kurt Vonnegut, maybe Harlan Ellison and William Gibson—that I am reduced to pointing to myself. And with the exception of Vonnegut, none of us really have the literary stature that Brian Aldiss has in Britain, where at this writing he is still a serious candidate for a knighthood.

Yet here, in an afterword interview to *Harm*, his most recent work of speculative fiction to be published in the United States, when speaking of a major apparently "mainstream" novel he's been working on, we have the following:

Aldiss: "... You don't happen to know an Anglophone American publisher who might be interested, do you?"

Interviewer: "It's incomprehensible to me that a writer of your proven gifts and stature could have difficulty placing a novel."

Indeed!

Especially considering that the imprint under which *Harm* itself has been published is that of a subsidiary of Random House, under whose full spectrum of imprints just about anything under the sun can be published.

*Harm* itself is an excellent example of post-genre speculative fiction written by one of the very writers who have been central in evolving it on a literary level with a mastery of the genre material, tropes, and techniques.

There are two interwoven story lines here, with two protagonists.

In near-future Britain, we have Paul Fadhil Abbas Ali, a British writer of Muslim descent whose brief joke about the assassination of a prime minister lands him in the Orwellian clutches of H.A.R.M., the Hostile Activities Research Ministry, an even nastier version of America's Homeland Security, and its more sophisticated version of Abu Ghraib.

On the further future colonial planet of Stygia, the protagonist is one Fremant, about whom we know little because he knows so little about himself or his past. For in order to send colonists to Stygia, they were deconstructed for the long trip, then re-constructed upon arrival with little of their memories intact, and those they have are possibly programmed.

Just as Paul's Britain has degenerated into a police state under the pressure of the current Holy War between Islamic jihadhists and the "West," Stygia has become a kind of petty banana republic, where the humanoid natives have been pretty much killed off, the only fauna are insects, and Fremant gets involved in a rather pathetic, half-assed, ignorant liberation movement.

This is a forthrightly political novel and an unashamedly nakedly an-

gry one. From my description thus far, had I hidden the identity of the writer, you would probably surmise that this is the sort of thing that might be written by one of those writers unfamiliar with the actual literature of speculative fiction, confusing it with satire, and rummaging through it for superficial schtick to recycle into a less than artful political screed. The novelistically primitive Aldous Huxley of *Brave New World* rather than the mature speculative writer of *Ape and Essence*, or *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*.

But you would be wrong, for this is a multilayered novel by Brian Aldiss, one of the creators of non-genre speculative fiction, who knows the mode as well as anyone does, who has not let his indignation override his attention to characterological depth, psychological subtlety, thematic complexity and ambiguity, or irony.

Actually, it would seem, there are two different story lines, but only one protagonist, the consciousness that is Paul/Fremant flashing back and forth unpredictably from stygian Stygia to the stygian clutches of H.A.R.M., dreaming of the one while embedded in the other. Maybe. Or maybe something even more ambiguous and subtle that Aldiss conveys as psychic complexity without ever really didactically explaining.

So what we have here is a fully rounded and sophisticated work of non-genre speculative fiction by a thoroughly experienced practitioner of same. Without casting aspersions, this is fully the equal of all of the non-genre speculative fiction written by the aforementioned literary lions and lionesses and superior to almost all of it on a literary level, including the science fiction of Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing.

Had it been written by one of

them, no doubt it would have been published by one of the literary imprints of Random House. Say Knopf, whose current honcho, Sonny Mehta, with an irony that might be appreciated by its author were he not its victim, would have considered it quite a feather in his editorial cap to have secured a novel by Brian W. Aldiss for the SF paperback line he was editing back in the day in London. Instead it could only find an American home with Del Rey Books, the SF genre line of Random House.

Judging the work by the identity of the author? Outright literary prejudice against a denizen of the genre ghetto? Does the bear shit in the woods?

That's where it's at now for authors typed as "science fiction writers" in the United States, no matter their level of artistry or proven literary accomplishment.

But the United States is not the world. Even English-language speculative fiction is far from the whole enchilada. Perhaps you've noticed.

Or not.

Under the aegis and with the subsidy support of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, James Morrow and Kathryn Morrow, with the aid of the necessary diverse hands, have put together the *SFWA European Hall of Fame*, an heroic effort to remedy that ignorance.

Here we have sixteen stories translated into English from thirteen different languages and relatively brief but cogent literary histories of the speculative fiction written in all of them. Nor are these old stories, but contemporary ones, more of them than not translated into English for the first time. This project was years in the making, a collective effort inspired by and in large part put together at the Utopials Festival in

France created by Bruno Della Chiesa to bring together writers, editors, and publishers from throughout the non-Anglophone worlds of speculative fiction to create a transnational community thereof. One that includes Americans and Brits, but as no more than equals. It says something touchingly positive that this collection was edited by Americans and financially subsidized by an organization that calls itself the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of *America*. Noblesse Oblige, in the true and original sense.

Far be it from me to attempt plot summaries or critiques of sixteen stories in this limited space. The salient point is that *The SFWA Hall of Fame* illuminates the often-obscured fact that speculative fiction has long and diverse individual histories in many countries, that a good many of them have little or nothing to do with "genre," and that taken together they reveal that in the wider world speculative fiction is a much larger literary tent than it is in the English-speaking countries.

In some of these languages it had never been genreified at all, at least until quite recently. In Romania, for example, it arose out of and was identified with literary surrealism, and later, as in the Soviet Union and its satellite states, was utilized as a disguised political protest literature, often to the peril of its practitioners when the mask slipped. In some parts of Latin America speculative fiction coalesced out of Magic Realism, or maybe vice versa, while in other parts there was a "pulp tradition." Ditto in Germany. France, of course, was the country of Jules Verne, progenitor of hard science fiction in English as well as in French, and there there has been a long history of genre SF.



And so forth. A long, complex history revealing that, in the overall picture of world literary history, speculative fiction has not been a minor pop cultural backwater, nor has it everywhere been disconnected from or scorned by general literary culture or limited in its scope, depth, and angles of fictional attack by the action-adventure formulas of genre or "pulp tradition."

The subtitle of the anthology is *Sixteen Contemporary Science Fiction Classics from the Continent*, and this is significant. In the 1940s through the 1970s and even beyond, most of what little reached Anglophone SF readers from other languages seemed unimaginatively derivative of Anglophone genre SF. But these contemporary stories demonstrate that by now the French, the Germans, the Italians, the Spanish, the Eastern Europeans, the Russians, and so forth have not only thoroughly absorbed the material and techniques of Anglophone SF far better than the "literary writers" in the United States rummaging through the "wastes" for their own limited purposes, but have melded them with their own traditions to produce a range of fiction that can be called "Science Fiction" by the SFWA itself.

A speculative fiction far more catholic and open-spirited than the general run of the fiction currently published by its own membership under the present dire commercial conditions.

This is no longer derivative second-rate stuff, no longer even merely "SF" as we think we know it in the United States. Here we have sophisticated straight science fiction by Jean-Claude Dunyach and Valerio Evangelisti, even hard science fiction reminiscent of "The Cold Equations" by

Andreas Eschbach, but also speculative fiction encompassing Magic Realism from the Spaniards Ricard De La Casa and Pedro Jorge Romero, the Russian Sergei Lukyanenko, the Greek Panagiotis Koustas. A bit of "post-modern space opera" totally tongue-in-cheek by the Romanian Lucian Merisca. Poetic psychic fantasies by the Dane Bernhard Ribbeck and the Russian Elena Arsenieva.

While America SF was devolving into retro nostalgic survivalism, perhaps because American product was becoming attenuated and therefore losing its commercial dominance on the European continent, in diverse European countries the homeboys and homegirls were capturing their own national markets from US exports, and doing it by writing the real deal in their own modes and styles. The contemporary non-Anglophone writers of speculative fiction are no longer aping English-language stuff.

They've got it, they've absorbed it, they've picked up the torch, and are carrying it on.

And sometimes boldly going where no western SF writers have gone before. For an extreme example take *Ice*, a novel by the Russian Vladimir Sorokin, which is about as extreme an example of any number of things as you are currently likely to find.

In modern Russia, even in the Wild East of contemporary Moscow where literary, cultural, and pop cultural extremism is something of the norm, Sorokin is a notorious, popular, and widely reviled literary agent-provocateur, in and out of hot water with the powers that be. To give you an idea of what they're dealing with, he wrote a novel featuring a sex scene between Stalin and Khrushchev that got copies of the book literarily

thrown in a fake public toilet bowl, and another that had Soviet citizens legally required to eat shit.

Surreal black satire, be sure and impossible to take as anything else, let alone speculative fiction. But *Ice* is a work of true post-genre speculative fiction, *science fiction* even, by a writer who seems to know just what that is and how to write it.

By the rules of the game, except for the hardest of hard science fiction, you are allowed at least one questionable speculative premise as long as it does not egregiously violate any of the known rules of physics, and perhaps even if it does as long as you can suspend disbelief. Otherwise it isn't speculative fiction.

In *Ice*, Sorokin's is that the Tunguska meteor that hit Siberia in 1908 was composed of a strange form of ice (shades of "ice-nine" in Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle*) that has been mined ever since by a secret tribe of blond-haired blue-eyed humans. When fashioned into the business end of a hammer and smashed repeatedly into the chest of someone with the appropriate genotype, it awakens the "voice of their heart," revealing them as one of the limited number of the elite, transforming them into units of a transcendental cult whose eventual mission is to awaken all such people. When this is finally accomplished, the human race is through, and the elect will be transmuted into transcendental beings of light (shades of Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*).

Admittedly this is pretty far out there. But then faster than light spaceships, time travel, and any number of often used and well-accepted science fictional schticks are much further out, being plain impossible according to the known laws of mass-energy.

But Sorokin does not use this outré McGuffin as a springboard out into the further realms where science fiction dissolves into fantasy. Nor does *Ice* really become a novel of mystical transcendentalism even in the final section where the mission is about to be completed.

The bulk of the novel is a viciously realistic journey through the vicious underworld demimondes of contemporary Moscow and environs, or perhaps, one hopes, of the bygone Yeltsin era, as thuggish cultists do their coldly cruel stuff, often as not to even more thuggish gangsters, narrated by Sorokin in the hardest of hard-boiled styles and with the coldest eye imaginable.

As extreme as the events of this novel are, this is not satire at all. This is nasty, violent, and vicious to the ultimate and thoroughly enjoyable if you have the stomach for such stuff, but it is hyper-realistically so, in the manner, say, of certain films of David Cronenberg or Sam Peckinpah. And as such it is non-genre speculative fiction par excellence—indeed non-genre science fiction by any meaningful definition. And it is a far better novel on that level than anything written so far by any of the American establishment literary figures attempting such stuff without similar control of speculative rigor.

Amazingly enough, *Ice* has been published in the United States by New York Review Books, the book publishing arm of the *New York Review of Books*, perhaps the main journal of the American literary mandarin, whose catalog of fiction includes nothing else remotely like it.

Kudos to them for doing it, though I cannot imagine why; perhaps because Vladimir Sorokin himself has

the necessary literary cachet in Russia, where, unlike in the United States, where William Burroughs had a long hard slog into literary acceptability, thanks in part to censorious conditions in the former Soviet Union, there is a tradition of accepting the work of literary shock-jocks into the literary canon.

Certainly if the very same novel had been written by yours truly, or John Shirley, or even Stephen King, a hyper-literary house like New York Review Books wouldn't touch it with a fork. Consider the attitude of the American literary establishment to even the rare works of Norman Mailer that wandered off the reservation and into the borderlands of "SF."

I must confess that I cannot be entirely neutrally objective about Norman Mailer—not that many other critics seem to be able to manage that either. I count Mailer among my literary inspirations and models, for I believe him to have been the last of the great twentieth century American so-called "mainstream" or "literary" novelists to fully engage in his own ways what I also believe, and thanks in no little part to his influence, is also, in its own manifold ways, the true literary mission of science fiction. That is, to explore the evolutionary feedback relationship between consciousness in all its depths and the external realities—political, cultural, sensory, media, technological—in which it finds itself, in all their interacting complexities.

And, as we shall see shortly, his final novel *The Castle in the Forest* is strangely connected to my novel *The Iron Dream*, to the point where I was commissioned to write a sidebar to the review of it in the German literary magazine *Bücher*. And the ire aroused in me by a line in his obituary in *Rolling Stone* written by the feminist critic Camille Paglia brought to mind a review of *Ancient Evenings*

I had written for this very magazine when it came out to less than sympathetic reviews elsewhere, which in part was the impetus for this essay. Wrote Paglia:

"Though I find some of his writing atrocious (such as *Ancient Evenings*, his seven hundred page Egyptian novel). . . ."

Serendipitously, shortly after his death, I saw a retrospective series of Mailer interviews on television. In one of them chronologically close to the end of his life, he was asked which of his many novels he considered his best, and Norman Mailer replied "*Ancient Evenings*."

How could this be possible? How could a novel that pretty much received killer reviews at the time in the journals where he would wish to be praised nevertheless be deemed by the writer near the end of his long creative life to be his best?

*Ancient Evenings* was generally condemned as a failed historical novel set in ancient Egypt, blatantly inaccurate and metaphysically foolish.

What I wrote at the time was that these ignorant worthies just didn't get it, while anyone familiar with, say, Roger Zelazny's *Lord of Light* or *Creatures of Light and Darkness* would realize from page one that *Ancient Evenings* is not an historical novel set in ancient Egypt. *Ancient Evenings* is a *fantasy* novel set in Norman Mailer's free-form dream of ancient Egypt and as such a masterpiece, at the very least the equal of Zelazny's Hugo winners in the same vein.

Non-genre "SF."

The establishment literary critics of the day could not see it, or if they could, they could not forgive even a favorite son like Norman Mailer for stooping to such stuff, let alone be equipped to judge it on its own literary merits. Whereas it probably would have easily been a Hugo contender had it been published in an

SF line as a first novel by an unknown.

And strangely enough, or perhaps not so strangely at all, at the very end of his Egyptian fantasy, Mailer, in a very brief flight of far-forward vision, seemed to be barely hinting, or at least so I took it, at embarking on some future essay into actual science fiction.

I was even moved to write him a letter encouraging him to do so, using something like the literary argument above. He never replied—I don't know whether he even got it or whether it was just a note in a bottle—and he never did it.

But in his last novel *The Castle in the Forest*, Norman Mailer did something quite new under the literary sun. He used the first-person voice of a demon, a sardonic and deeply philosophical demon that Mark Twain could love, to tell the exhaustively researched story of the childhood and early adolescence of Adolf Hitler, to give us the boy that was the father to the man.

This, of course, is why the German literary magazine asked me to write that sidebar, which I titled *Channeling Hitler*. In *The Iron Dream*, I used the narrative voice of an alternate Hitler to write his fantasy of the Third Reich in an alternate world where he was a writer of heroic science fantasy. This device explicated the psychopathology of Hitler and Nazism. In *The Castle in the Forest*, Mailer uses the voice of a minion of Satan to explicate the familial psychopathology as it evolved the boy who became the man.

Aside from the fact that it is a demon telling the story, *The Castle in the Forest* is a classical realistic subspecies of the historical novel; the psychological historical novel, Freudian more often than not, which views history through character, and character as molded by childhood family

drama. One can argue with such an explanation of the being of Adolf Hitler, but not with the thoroughness and brilliance with which Mailer presents it.

Like any good historical novelist, Mailer uses the gaps in the known facts—and in the biography of Hitler there are many of them—to inject his own extrapolations and, like a good science fiction novelist, turn what could otherwise be mere reportage into literary art.

But just as the fictional voice of my adult fictional Hitler cannot be taken for my own, the fictional narrative voice of *The Castle in the Forest* should not and hopefully cannot be taken as a device to simply give Mailer's narrative voice the necessary omniscience. It does do that, for it probes deeply into the psyches and very souls of Hitler's parents and siblings. But Mailer's demon is a character himself, not a mere mouthpiece for the author, with his own doubts, desires, regrets, fraught personal relationship with Satan—Himself a minor speaking character with a complex personality—and low opinion of God and his angelic hitmen.

In a sense, *The Castle in the Forest* is two interwoven novels, an historical novel and a fantasy, but only from the crabbed and obsessive taxonomological viewpoint of those who insist in tranching up fiction in genre categories.

In a larger and more illuminating sense, *The Castle in the Forest*, though not a science fiction novel at all, is certainly a novel in the spirit of speculative fiction, a novel that uses the techniques of fantasy to illumine the tragic drama of history, that delves the depths where consciousness makes destiny, where external events mold the human spirit.

And is that not what the rapidly exploding technosphere and devolving biosphere and their effects on the mu-

tating human consciousness is forcing so-called "literary" fiction to deal with in the twenty-first century or sink like a stone into cultural irrelevance? And is that not what the dying of genre science fiction as commercially viable will both free and force the best of us to once more dare?

Genre science fiction is dying.

The genrefication of speculative fiction is dying.

Long live non-genre speculative fiction!

The genrefication of fiction itself is dying and good riddance.

Long live the fictions of Prometheus Unbound!

I do believe that Norman Mailer knew this in his heart of hearts, and I do believe, as with Philip K. Dick in *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*, with *The Castle in the Forest*, he found a full flowering of that freedom at the very end of a fruitful life's journey

Hail and farewell. O

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# SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

The first weekend in October is one of the busiest weeks of the year for science fiction get-togethers. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 5 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

## SEPTEMBER 2008

- 5-7—CopperCon. For info, write: Box 62613, Phoenix AZ 85082. Or phone: (480) 949-0415 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (Web) [casfs.org/cucon](http://casfs.org/cucon). (E-mail) [cu26@coppercon.org](mailto:cu26@coppercon.org). Con will be held in: Tempe AZ (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Guest list to be announced. Traditional late-summer event, to reminisce about WorldCon.
- 12-14—ConChord. [bgold@ca.rr.com](mailto:bgold@ca.rr.com). Marriott, Northridge CA. A. Adams, A. Savitsky, Paul Estin. SF folksinging.
- 12-14—Nan Desu Kan. [ndkdenver.org](http://ndkdenver.org). Tech Center Marriott, Denver CO. Mignogna, Patton, S. Yun, T. Yune. Anime.
- 19-21—MountainCon, Box 896, Centerville UT 80414. (801) 294-4054. [mountaincon.org](http://mountaincon.org). Library. K. Sorbo, R. Herd.
- 19-21—Anime Weekend, Box 13544, Atlanta GA 30324. [awa-con.com](http://awa-con.com). Renaissance Waverly. R. & E. DeJesus, C. Horn.
- 19-21—MikomiCon. [mikomicon.org](http://mikomicon.org). Cal State U., Northridge CA. K. Sa, Fred Perry, Quarter Circle Jam, Adella. Anime.
- 26-28—ConJecture, Box 927388, San Diego CA 92192. [conjecture.org](http://conjecture.org). Crowne Plaza/Red Lion Hanalei. David Drake.
- 26-28—ConText, Box 16391, Columbus OH 43216. (614) 868-8366. Ramada, Sinclair Rd. Huff, Guran. For written SF.
- 26-28—Foolsap, Box 2461, Bellevue WA 98111. [foolscap.org](http://foolscap.org). Marriott, Redmond WA. E. SF on paper (written & art).
- 26-28—JumpCon. [jumpcon.com](http://jumpcon.com). Chattanooga TN. E. J. Almos, M. McConnell, Bodeitner, Beltran, Furlan, Jason Carter.
- 26-28—TsubasaCon, Box 340902, Columbus OH 43234. [tsubasdacon.org](http://tsubasdacon.org). Huntington WV. Ultraball, Jen Quick. Anime.
- 27-28—AuroraCon, Box 210050, Anchorage AK 99521. Vic Mignogna, Brett Uhner, Colleen Clickenbeard. Anime.

## OCTOBER 2008

- 2-5—Con on the Cob, 372 Alpha Ave., Akron OH 44312. (330) 734-0337. [andy@andyhopp.com](mailto:andy@andyhopp.com). Holiday Inn West.
- 2-5—ShriekFest, Box 920444, Sylmar CA 91392. Raleigh Studios on Melrose, Hollywood CA. Horror film.
- 3-5—Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. (636) 230-9481. Collinsville IL. L. Hamilton, Kovalic, the Zelliches, Milan.
- 3-5—Silicon, 1009 E. Capitol Expwy. #415, San Jose CA 95121. [siliconventions.com](http://siliconventions.com). Doubletree. "Salute to Fanac."
- 3-5—VCon, 1330 Graveley #302, Vancouver BC V5L 3A2. [vcon.ca](http://vcon.ca). Rothfuss, Snellings, J. Ernest, Dr. J. Matthews.
- 3-5—FenCon, Box 701448, Dallas TX 75370. [fencon.org](http://fencon.org). Crowne Plaza, Addison TX. Benford, Waldrop, R. Musgrave.
- 3-5—FlatCon, Box 109, Minier IL 61759. [flatcon.com](http://flatcon.com). [flatcon@flatcon.com](http://flatcon@flatcon.com). Interstate Center, Bloomington IL.
- 3-5—Eastern Media Con, Box 60623, Staten Island NY 10306. [easternmediacon@aol.com](mailto:easternmediacon@aol.com). Newark NJ. Adult media.
- 3-5—TrickConTreat, 2304 N. Redmond Ave., Bethany OK 73008. (405) 436-2446. [trickcontreat.com](http://trickcontreat.com). Oklahoma City OK.
- 3-5—Flk Continental, Am Rosenhag 24a, Berlin D-12623, Germany. +49 30-49766569. Freusberg. SF folksinging.
- 3-6—ConFlux, Box 603, Belconnen ACT 2616, Australia. [conflux.org.au](http://conflux.org.au). Marquee Hotel. Sharyn November, Jack Dann.
- 10-12—AlbaCon, Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. [albacon.org](http://albacon.org). Crowne Plaza. Anne & Todd McCaffrey, Barclay Shaw.
- 10-12—SitaCon. [sitacon.com](http://sitacon.com). Utica NY. "Central NY's First Anime Con Returns."
- 10-12—Anime USA, Box 4583, Crofton MD 21114. [animeusa.org](http://animeusa.org). Hyatt, Crystal City (Arlington) VA (near DC). Seitz.
- 10-13—GaylaxiCon, c/o Box 656, Washington DC 20044. [gaylaxicon2008.org](http://gaylaxicon2008.org). Near DC. For gay, etc., fans & friends.
- 11-12—DeryniCon. [derynicon.remuthcastle.com](http://derynicon.remuthcastle.com). Holiday Inn W., Harrisburg PA. Katherine Kurtz. Deryni & Adept.

## AUGUST 2009

- 6-10—Anticipation, CP 105, Montreal QC H4A 3P4. [anticipationsf.ca](http://anticipationsf.ca). Gaiman, Hartwell, Doherty. WorldCon. US\$190+.



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# NEXT ISSUE

## OUR NEW FORMAT

You're sure to notice something a little different about next month's December issue—we have switched to a new format with fewer but larger pages. The reason for the change is nothing to be alarmed by. Paper and production costs have presented *Asimov's* and our sister publication, *Analog*, with a choice: increase subscription rates and single-issue costs to retain the old format, or adopt a slightly different size and retain our current prices. Naturally, we felt it was of best benefit to all to choose the latter. As you'll see below, the award-winning content inside our magazine will always remain of the same high standards.

## DECEMBER ISSUE

December is an issue inspired by the myriad pleasures of music, as evidenced by **David Ira Cleary's** cover story. A washed-up grunge band seek to spread a message of peace through their music, despite the evident risks to life and flannel-bedecked limb, in an area of civil unrest. Their earnest protest songs don't quite come off as they've planned and they must come to terms with unintended effects on both the members of their band and their listeners, all the while threatened by a horrifying new method of chemical terrorism, "The Flowers of Nicosia." Featuring a fabulous new cover by the inimitable **J.K. Potter**.

## ALSO IN DECEMBER

**Melanie Tem and Steve Rasnic Tem** return with "In Concert," a wistful tale of an elderly woman who somehow manages to establish mental contact with a lost and possibly doomed astronaut; **Tim Sullivan** takes us "Way Down East" with a crew of lobster fishermen hired to set sail with a *very strange cargo* on a day-trip that will change all of their lives forever; **Kathryn Lance and Jack McDevitt** bid a hesitant Richard Wagner "Welcome to Valhalla"; **Steven Utley** proves that "Perfect Everything" probably isn't such a great boon at all; and **Geoffrey A. Landis** celebrates the auspicious anniversary of one of literature's great classics, "Still On the Road" after all these years.

## OUR EXCITING FEATURES

**Robert Silverberg** continues his appreciation of Murray Leinster's vast talent in his "Reflections" column, "A Logic Named Will"; **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of poetry you'll enjoy. Look for our December issue at your newsstand on October 7, 2008. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's*—by mail or online, in varying formats, including downloadable forms, by going to our website, [www.asimovs.com](http://www.asimovs.com). We're also available on *Amazon.com's* Kindle!

## COMING SOON

new stories by **Nancy Kress**, **Brian Stableford**, **Judith Berman**, **Bruce McAllister**, **Chris Beckett**, **Kristine Kathryn Rusch**, **William Barton**, **Carol Emshwiller**, **Larry Niven**, **Michael Cassutt**, **Damien Broderick**, **Steven Utley**, **Will McIntosh**, and many others. . . .

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